**WISDOM FROM HEAVEN**

November 25, 2012

James 3:1-18

Key Verse 3:17 “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.”

James’ book is full of sharp rebuke and clear teaching regarding our life of faith in Christ. But James did not think that he was holy because his brother Jesus was the Son of God. Instead, James emphasizes that faith without deeds is dead. He applied this rule first of all to himself. James 2:18b says, “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.” James’ teaching is pointed and direct precisely because he knows his limitations as a man. He recognizes in today’s passage that his greatest obstacle as a teacher is controlling his own tongue. And he warns us who would be Bible teachers that we must do the same. Bible teachers who depend on their tongues are kindling for the fires of hell. James then answers the question: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” May God bless us to learn from today’s passage what wisdom from heaven is, and how to demonstrate it in our lives of faith as fruitful one to one Bible teachers!

I. Taming the tongue (1-12)

James begins his discourse with strong warning. “Not many of you should presume to be teachers (1a).” James is a good Bible teacher. How can we know that? James considers Bible teaching to be a divine responsibility that must be carried out. He does not regard his status as teacher a human privilege to be enjoyed. James is therefore not discouraging people from teaching the Bible. Bible teaching is crucial to the life and growth of believers everywhere. It is a high calling, holy responsibility and a noble task, which should be desired (1 Ti 3:1). James is discouraging people, however, from presuming that Bible teaching is a quick and easy way to achieving social respectability. It is because Bible teaching is a service to God, and will be judged as such. Those who would like to use Bible study as a means of worldly advancement and self-promotion, therefore, had better think twice.

The book of Job gives us a wonderful example of this truth. Job was a man of highest honor and position in his day. He had been blessed by God in every way. So, people eagerly waited for his counsel, and drank in his words like the spring rain (Job 29:23). Then, one day, everything went wrong. His wealth, his children and his health were all taken from him. His wife counseled him, “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” But Job did not despair. He told her, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:10). He sat silently in dust and ashes for seven days. His friends, Bildad, Eliphaz and Zophar came to him when they heard the news, and when they saw his condition, they waited in shock for him to speak. But when Job expressed his helplessness before God’s judgment, the friends were irritated that Job spoke so bluntly about his suffering. They wanted Job to confess that he was suffering because of sin. Secretly, they wanted to commend themselves for wisely avoiding suffering, and thereby claim that they were not sinning. They tried through righteous-sounding discourse to wring a sobbing confession out of the pitiful Job. They felt confident that they were wise enough to instruct Job in his time of trouble. But what did God say when he intervened in their discussion? Job 42:7 says, “After the Lord had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” Whoops! How had the friends erred? They assumed that God was punishing Job for his sins. They completely misrepresented God. Bible study is first of all speaking of God. We must make every effort to speak of him what is right. We must teach others what is right, in the knowledge and fear that what, how and why we teach will be judged.

Look at verse 2. “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.” We all stumble in many ways. But the first way that every person stumbles is in what he says. Once Jesus told the rich man who came to him looking for the shortcut to eternal life, “No one is good, except God alone.” (Lk 18:19b). The rich man himself was a very disciplined and noble person. Yet the first thing he said to Jesus, “good teacher,” was wrong, and revealed a world of wrong-thinking in the man’s heart. If there is any deviation from the truth in our hearts, it will be revealed first of all by what we say. Hence James counseled, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (1:19). The Bible teacher must know that the more he speaks, the more likely he will be at fault in what he says. Therefore, he must tremble, and submit himself to the Spirit of truth moment by moment.

Look at verses 3-4. “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.” Here, James is talking about the point of control. When we want to control a horse, we use a bit in the mouth. A small rudder placed underneath or at the back of a ship redirects the flow of water and steers the whole ship. For example, the Queen Elizabeth weighed 83,673 tons. The rudder of that ship weighed only 140 tons. Look at verse 5. “Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.” For a human being, the point of control for the whole body is the tongue. If we hope to control the body, we must first control the tongue.

The reality, however, is that the tongue is usually out of control. Look at verse 6. “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” So many human tragedies have resulted from the careless words men and women have spoken. We often times make hasty conclusions without carefully listening, when we talk one-to-one or to a group of people. We teach wrong ideas or what we do not understand unintentionally. We swear thoughtlessly. We confidently push students to obey the word when we don’t actually do that. Even though these are careless errors, they hurt people and make them wander and sometimes cry. In case of serious physical sins like stealing, fighting, or murdering, most Christians will think about its seriousness and stop it. Yet without second thought, we tolerate gossip, slander, deceit, profanity and complaining, as if they were no big deal. We may have experiences that we ignored or put down other’s opinion or burst into anger. Those things hurt people and the wounds are carved in their heart. Who can measure the harm done, the tears that have flowed, the broken hearts? Who can measure the misery it has brought to our own lives, inner bitterness, shame, and the bad effects on our health?

Look at verses 9-10. “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness.Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.” How absurd and inconsistent our tongue is! With the same tongue we praise God with gospel songs and hymns at worship service, and pour out profane words after that. We don’t want that and it should not be the case. But why does this happen? Our Lord Jesus gave an answer in Luke 6:45, “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.” The tongue is an instrument making sound and the mouth is an opening to vent whatever is in our heart. If anyone has viper’s venom in his heart, he will speak venomous words and although he praises God, it is a short-living pretense. Therefore, we should cleanse our hearts through the word of God every day so that we may praise God, and speak the inspiring and encouraging words that build up everyone.

II. Earthly cleverness and godly wisdom (13-18)

Now we know that our heart is a storeroom for either good things or evil things that are fuel for our tongue and deeds. Look at verse 13. Many people wanted to be teachers, thinking that they were wise and understanding. James challenges those with high spirits. “Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” The wisdom of a Bible teacher is measured by his life, not by the words he uses. The wisdom of a Bible teacher is measured by the obedience with which he practices what he preaches. The wisdom of a Bible teacher is seen in his humility that he can be wrong, and when he is wrong, he is willing to be corrected by his student. James classified wisdom into two: the earthly wisdom and the wisdom that comes from heaven. But in fact earthly wisdom is fake wisdom. I call it “earthly cleverness.” We should not be confused by it.

Look at verses 14-16. “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, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” The earthly clever man is characterized by bitter envy and selfish ambition. His one passion in life is to advance his own interests. He is jealous of any competitors and destroys others for his own success. What does this cleverness result in after all? It causes confusion, conflict, disorder, quarrel and division at church and elsewhere. So such people are trouble-makers.

Let’s read verse 17. “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.” God gives us this wisdom through our deep relationship with God, when our motive is pure. We call this “godly wisdom.” The pure motive is the first importance when we pray to God for wisdom. On top of the pure motive, James teaches us the 6 characters of godly wisdom. It is peace-making, meek and gentle, submissive and easily persuaded, full of mercy and good fruit, without partiality and without hypocrisy. What the wonderful character of this wisdom is! It is full of love and a giving heart, consistent with the holiness of God.

Let me give portraits of two men—the truly wise man and the earthly clever man.

The truly wise man is genuinely humble. He considers others better than himself. He does not pretend to be somebody. In words and deeds, he makes you think of the Lord Jesus. His life is pure. Morally and spiritually he is clean. He will endure insult and false accusations but will not fight back or even seek to justify himself. He is gentle, mild-mannered, and tenderhearted. He is easy to reason with, willing to try to see the other person’s viewpoint. He is not vindictive but always ready to forgive those who have wronged him. Not only so but he habitually shows kindness to others, especially to those who don’t deserve it. He is the same to all; he does not show favoritism. The rich receive the same treatment as the poor; the great are not preferred above the common people. Most of all, he is not a hypocrite. He doesn’t say one thing and mean another. You will never hear him flatter. He speaks the truth and never wears a mask.

The earthly clever man is not so. His heart is filled with envy and strife. In his determination to enrich himself, he becomes intolerant of every rival or competitor. He lives to gratify his desires. Beneath his well-pressed suit is a life of impurity. His though life is polluted, his morals corrupted, his speech unclean. He is quarrelsome with all who disagree with him or who cross him in any way. At home, at work, in social life, he is constantly contentious. He is harsh and overbearing, rude and crude. To reason with him quietly is all but impossible. His mind is already made up, and his opinions are not subject to change. He is unforgiving and vindictive. When he catches someone in a fault or error, he shows no mercy. Rather he criticizes and abuses them. He values people according to the benefit they might be to him. When he can no longer use them, that is, when there is no hope of profit from knowing them, he loses interest in them. Most of all, he is insincere. You can never be sure of him—either of his words or actions.

I pray that all of us may be truly wise men and women before God. I pray that we may clean our hearts with the word of God and so that we may speak the word of praise and encouragement.