James 3:13-18 – Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

My Translation:

Who (is) wise and discerning among you? He is to demonstrate the works from his advantageous conduct in gentleness of wisdom; but if you have bitter jealousy and strife (selfish ambition) in your heart, do not self-exalt and do not lie against the truth. This is not the wisdom what comes down from above, rather (this is) earthy, natural, demonic. For, where (there is) jealousy and strife (selfish ambition), (there is) disorder and every evil occurrence. But the wisdom from above is first pure then peaceful, suitable, good for persuasion, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, unhypocritical. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace to the ones making peace.

Context:

Last lesson we demonstrated that this section is the thematic peak of the book. We saw that every theme from every section of the book is represented in this one paragraph. We also saw that this paragraph encapsulates the main theme of the book, wisdom, which was alluded to in James 1:5-8. We also saw an alliteration utilized by James to demonstrate that the wisdom from above is orderly.

Verse 13 is a Hebraism – *Wise and understanding* is used for the leadership of Israel and then later for Daniel. This is evidently leadership within the synagogue, not necessarily rabbis but, based upon context of verse 1, this at least includes rabbis. These leaders are to demonstrate “deeds from good conduct.” We pointed out that the instruction is not to keep from being bad but to actively do good works.

Verse 14-16 is a list of negative traits which stand in opposition to “works sourced in excellent behavior in gentleness of wisdom.” We concluded 13-16 in these 5 points:

1. The implication is that the readership is not doing what they ought to be.
2. This begins with the leadership (wise and understanding).
3. They have adopted a “me first,” earthly worldview.
4. This is leading to discord, confusion, insurrection, and disorder.
5. James is holding all persons responsible, but the leaders incur a more thorough evaluation.

Exegetical Analysis:

What we want to see is how James contrasts the evil traits to the godly traits in this paragraph. The evil is wisdom that is earthly (of this world), natural (physical, non-spiritual), and demonic. The godly is the wisdom from above which has 7 characteristics:
1. Pure
2. Peaceful
3. Gentle
4. Yielding
5. Full (of mercy and good fruits)
6. Impartial
7. Unhypocritical

Verse 17 first starts with “the wisdom from above.” The word wisdom we know (σοφία sophia), but do we understand the implication with Hebraic understanding. Remember, we are reading a letter that is very Hebrew in nature. The Hebrew word for wisdom is typically “חָכַם hakêm (verb)” or “חָכְמָה hâkmâ (noun).” The idea “to be wise” and “wisdom” in the Hebrew Scripture is a broadly defined word group.

In the Septuagint (LXX), other Hebrew words are also translated into “σοφία sophia.” They include words that mean insight, discretion, inventive, or artistic. But the “חָכַם hakêm” also has a variety of definitions in the complete package.

1. Application of knowledge
2. Skill
3. Ethical conduct
4. Understanding
5. Prudence
6. Ability to properly interpret information

Even in English, having a generic thought of someone who is a wise person indicates a very broad spectrum in a variety of areas.

Typically, a person who has one ability, one understanding, is not considered to be a wise person. A person, one who is very skilled in a specialty but does not seem to have other workable knowledge, is not considered to be wise, but rather is wise just in that one ability. In the Hebrew Scripture, a single skill is sometimes represented by wisdom (Exodus 36:1-2).

In our culture, a person is wise if he is a very well rounded individual and able to give understanding and advice in many areas. If he does not know something, he has the prudence to say, “I don’t know.” This is also the concept in biblical terms as well (Proverbs 1:1-2; Proverbs 3:5 – בִּיָנה bînāh; Ephesians 3:8-10).

In biblical terms, the Hebrew Scriptures or Greek New Testament, someone who has wisdom is well rounded in many biblical doctrines and has the ability to assess circumstances and apply biblical truth to the situation. Daniel, Solomon, and Job are considered to be the wisest of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the New Testament, the persons highlighted are Jesus, James, and Paul.

*From above* is the same word as in James 1:17. There we made the point that this word either means above, from the top, or metaphorically, from the beginning. In John 3, “you must be born again” should be understood as “you must be born from above.”

Therefore, the wisdom from above is that which is given by God (1:5). If the source of wisdom is from God, then what we have is an application of knowledge, a spiritual skill, an understanding, a proper ethic, an ability to properly interpret scripture and convey that to a person seeking God’s truth, and the prudence to weigh circumstances with scripture and have a proper perspective.
Now we have the list characteristics; these are all adjectives in the same grammatical form (Nominative Singular Feminine) as the noun wisdom. Coupled with the to be verb “εἰμί eimi,” we have an emphatic way to describe the wisdom from above.

Is James commanding people here? Is this instruction? Is he telling people to be pure? To be peaceful? To be gentle? Etc? When something is described, it places the emphasis on the noun not the adjectives. What this is not saying is, “If you want to be wise, be pure.” That is incorrect. This is not a command that is to be followed but a statement of truth. These two verses enable the student to recognize true godly wisdom.

We all know people, or know of people, that can list good doctrine, but is it done from wisdom or is it done from selfish ambition and bitter jealousy? Normally, when we review the character of a teacher, the primary concern is, are they speaking the truth? James is assuming that the audience does not need a lesson in truth; they need a lesson in manner (how the truth is proclaimed) and follow through (do they live what they proclaim).

The primary characteristic of the wisdom from above is pure. We know that this is the primary characteristic due to a “πρῶτον proton”/ “ἔπειτα epeita” construction. There is no other conjunction following then joining the adjectives. So, the primary adjective is pure.

Pure is “ἁγνός hagnos.” This word and its cognates are where we get the word for holy, set apart, sanctified. In the simplest terms, this word means unstained with sin. The best verse to demonstrate this is 1st Timothy 5:22. Here, the last phrase is literally “you keep yourself pure.” If one is proclaiming the “wisdom of God” but his truth, advice, or understanding is tainted with sin, even a little, that wisdom is not from God.

It is obvious why this is the primary attribute. If God is free from sin, He is holy, and He is pure, then His truth and wisdom must also be free from sin, holy, and pure.

The secondary characteristics begin with “εἰρηνικός eirēnikos” (peaceable). The Hebrew word is “שָׁלוֹם shalom,” which we know is another multifaceted word. “Shālôm” includes internal, external, mental, spiritual, and emotional peace with God, others, and yourself.

If one is proclaiming the “wisdom of God” but his truth, advice, or understanding does not lead to peace but rather leads to discord, strife, and turmoil, then that wisdom is not from God.

Next is gentle, “ἐπιεικής epieikēs.” This is a more difficult word. The compound word means “upon resemblance.” The typical definition is “not insisting on every right or letter of law or custom, yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant,” but also it has been suggested that this is “right-minded” (Philippians 4:5; 1st Timothy 3:3; Titus 3:1-2; 1st Peter 2:18). This is different than James 3:13 (πραΰτης prautēs). Based upon usage (which is not easy) and the language tools, this word probably means “reasonable.”

Next in the list is reasonable, translated from “εὐπειθής eupeithēs.” This is the only usage of the word in the New Testament. This is a compound of “εὖ” and “πείθω” which is “good” and “persuade.” One lexicon deals with this word more intently than others. The implication of this word in various other writings is rooted in “able to be persuaded.”
Most take this intransitively, the wisdom of God is able to be persuaded, brought to agreement. In my opinion, this should not be viewed as the influence being upon the wisdom of God, rather the wisdom of God is good for persuasion. Now if this were describing the one who has the wisdom of God and we want to say that the person is “willing to yield, willing to be persuaded,” then I can see that, but the adjective describes the wisdom from above which cannot yield or be persuaded.

The next adjective is full and has two nouns that describe of what it is full—that is mercy and good fruit. “μεστός mestos” means having full measure, consumed with, or fully characterized by.

Mercy, “ἐλεος eleos,” contains the idea of compassion, pity, and sympathy as a response to someone else’s condition of distress. This is done in many situations, understanding that the fate of the one may also affect the one showing mercy.

Good fruit is “καρπός karpos - ἀγαθός agathos.” The word for fruit is accurate based upon both the literal fruit of a plant or tree, or figuratively this is the result of the production. What is the result of wisdom from above? The results are characterized by good of a godly standard.

The phrase full of mercy and good fruits seems to work as a literary parenthetical between the three positive adjectives and the two alpha negative adjectives.

“ἀδιάκριτος adiakritos” is the alpha negative of the word in James 1:6 (doubts, deliberates) and 2:4 (distinctions, partial). So, we have two choices. This can mean the deliberation within one person. This can also mean the distinctions that people make between others. Because of the nature of the external action upon others, the understanding of “impartial” is probably best.

Finally, “ἀνυπόκριτος anupokritos” is the alpha negative of hypocrisy, a Greek word that is used of actors on a stage. The wisdom from above does not simply play a part but is real, genuine, and unfeigned.

Verse 18 – the literal translation is “the fruit (result) of righteousness is being sown in peace, for the ones who make peace.” This verse is used as a capstone of verses 13-17 but also leads into the hortatory section, verses 4:1-12, where James is indicating that there is no peace in their synagogues. James shifts from the character traits of the wisdom from above and moves toward persons who are peacemakers.

Most reference this verse to Matthew 5:9. The danger is that Matthew 5 is about the necessities, rules, and who will be cared for in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:3,10,19).

The idea of those who make peace is the principle from Matthew 5:9 and is also understood in James 3:18. A person who makes peace is one who seeks reconciliation and forgiveness.

This may first be understood in regard to those who seek to help others be reconciled to God, but the extension is also clear of those who help establish peace between those who are part of the assembly.

**Conclusion:**

This section is both convicting and encouraging. We need to understand that this section is primarily the character of the two competing wisdoms. What does the wisdom of the world look like? What does the wisdom from above look like?

The practical use of this passage is not to try to emulate the positive but to focus on and utilize the wisdom of God. Is what we see from others discernable as being wisdom from God or not? Remember that this is not about content of teaching. This is about what that person says is the application of that content.