

## TURNING THE CASUAL INTO THE ACTUAL

### Part VI: Cultivating Practical Wisdom James 3:1-13—4:10 (NLT)

*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:17)*

Kenny lived on the same dorm floor with me my freshman year in college. Kenny is what you would call a ‘brainiac.’ His major was in electrical engineering and he minored in biology. Every word that came out of his mouth was intelligent. He could explain everything using science and technology. My conversations with him would normally last only five minutes; Kenny would lose me with his scientific explanations. We were all amazed by how smart and talented he was. I always considered Kenny a wise person.

But, when it came to social relationships Kenny was clueless. His wisdom in the classroom did not help him one bit when it came to meeting people. I remembered one night when I had dinner with Kenny and a bunch of other friends. Kenny liked one of the girls who was with us, but he had trouble having a conversation with her. He would use all of these scientific terminology on her, but you could tell she lost interest from the beginning. It was sad to see her ignore Kenny the whole time at dinner while Kenny tried very hard to get her attention. Unfortunately, Kenny’s wisdom could not rescue him here.

It is very interesting how society defines the word ‘wisdom’ for us. For some, wisdom is accumulating head knowledge through education. The more degrees and valedictorians we have under our belt the more wisdom we have. But, others consider wisdom to mean common sense, being able to live in harmonious relationships with those around us. Still, others consider wisdom as philosophical anecdotes meant to transform a person’s moral and ethical beliefs. But, what does Scripture say about wisdom? Let us take a look by reading James 3:13—4:10.

*<sup>13</sup>If you are wise and understand God's ways, live a life of steady goodness so that only good deeds will pour forth. And if you don't brag about the good you do, then you will be truly wise! <sup>14</sup>But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your hearts, don't brag about being wise. That is the worst kind of lie. <sup>15</sup>For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and motivated by the Devil. <sup>16</sup>For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every kind of evil.*

*<sup>17</sup>But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no partiality and is always sincere. <sup>18</sup>And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of goodness.*

*<sup>1</sup>What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Isn't it the whole army of evil desires at war within you? <sup>2</sup>You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous for what others have, and you can't possess it, so you fight and quarrel to take it away from them. And yet the reason you*

*don't have what you want is that you don't ask God for it. <sup>3</sup>And even when you do ask, you don't get it because your whole motive is wrong--you want only what will give you pleasure.*

*<sup>4</sup>You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with this world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again, that if your aim is to enjoy this world, you can't be a friend of God. <sup>5</sup>What do you think the Scriptures mean when they say that the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, jealously longs for us to be faithful? <sup>6</sup>He gives us more and more strength to stand against such evil desires. As the Scriptures say,*

*"God sets himself against the proud,  
but he shows favor to the humble."*

*<sup>7</sup>So humble yourselves before God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Draw close to God, and God will draw close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, you hypocrites. <sup>9</sup>Let there be tears for the wrong things you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. <sup>10</sup>When you bow down before the Lord and admit your dependence on him, he will lift you up and give you honor.*

There are three principles I would like to highlight here regarding wisdom. The first is this:

1. True wisdom is connected to the **purpose and mission** of God. (3:13)

*<sup>13</sup>If you are wise and understand God's ways, live a life of steady goodness so that only good deeds will pour forth. And if you don't brag about the good you do, then you will be truly wise!*

- Wisdom = our thoughts and words that promote the will of God through our behavior

We usually associate wisdom as being cultivated within us; that is, we are the source of wisdom itself. But, James sees it very differently. Wisdom is 'understanding *God's ways*.' Wisdom is never about our way, our knowledge, our experience. True wisdom is centered on the very notion that God's purpose is what we need to connect to; it is God's mission that we need to follow.

Therefore, it is very important to know what kind of wisdom comes from God and what does not. James 3:13-18 specifies these things clearly for us:

- Wisdom from God
  - 'a life of steady goodness' (strength under control) (3:13)

All it takes to control a powerful beast such as a horse is to use a bridle. The horse's strength and movement can be directed by means of the bit in its mouth. Wisdom from God promotes strength under control, i.e., a life of steady goodness. Under the power of the Holy Spirit we are directed to produce acts of love and mercy to people around us. This wisdom is practically lived out under the authority of God.

- 'does not brag' (we honor God as we humble ourselves) (3:13)

When we are consumed by God's wisdom there is no room for our pride to exist. God is the only one to be honored while we live in humility. All that we are and all that we do must reflect this spiritual ingredient of distinguishing God's lordship over us. Our voice and action must lift up Jesus and Jesus alone.

- 'pure' (free from corruption) (3:17-18)

Wisdom from God has no trace of sin or defect. This means that our lives must exemplify existences that are free from sinful corruption and destruction. Our motives and behavior must replicate pure thoughts and actions towards God and towards one another.

Now, what is wisdom that is not from God?

- Wisdom that is not from God

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- 'bitter jealousy and selfish ambition' (seeks for personal gain only) (3:14-15)
- 'disorder and evil' (does not build up the person at all) (3:16)

It is quite easy to determine whether our wisdom is from God or not; look at our actions. If our lives demonstrate bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, we are not living under God's wisdom. If we are full of evil and we encourage disorder, our wisdom is not from God. We must face up to the image that we see in the mirror. Wisdom not from God will produce a life that invites sinful devastation towards oneself as well as towards other people. But, wisdom from God cultivates a life that favors goodness towards others, peace that is loving, gentleness, and yielding to one another in grace and mercy.

What happens when our lives continually embrace a wisdom that is not from God? The second principle is this:

2. **Communities and relationships are fractured** when our wisdom does not come from God. (4:1-6)

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*us to be faithful? <sup>6</sup>He gives us more and more strength to stand against such evil desires. As the Scriptures say,*

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James is very clear when our lives do not center under God's wisdom; destruction in relationships is guaranteed. Jealousy and selfishness spring up when we choose not to live by God's wisdom. Isn't it true that when it comes to envy and self-centeredness we would do everything in our power to get what we want, even if it means hurting somebody else in the process? We might claim that it is God's fault since he did not give us what we want. But, James points out that God does not give because what we desire does not fit according to God's plan for our lives. How important it is for us to submit under God's wisdom, to humble ourselves under his authority, and to allow the Holy Spirit to direct us onto the right paths in life! If we choose to align ourselves with the world and all of her shortcomings, we should not expect God to be there for us. God wants each one of us to remain with him, to abide in him, and to be transformed through his word and mighty spirit. God sides with the humble, those who choose to submit in his wisdom, both in mind and in action.

So, how can we practically apply God's wisdom in our everyday lives? Here is the last principle:

3. True wisdom **calls us into radical repentance** whereby our thoughts, words and actions promote God's will. (4:7-10)

*<sup>7</sup>So humble yourselves before God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Draw close to God, and God will draw close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, you hypocrites. <sup>9</sup>Let there be tears for the wrong things you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. <sup>10</sup>When you bow down before the Lord and admit your dependence on him, he will lift you up and give you honor.*

Here are five sensible yet effective things we must incorporate into our lives to reflect an existence of active faith.

- Humility (what is important to God is important to us) (4:7)
- Resist Satan (do not doubt or disobey God) (4:7)
- Drawing close to God (confession and active change in our lives) (4:8)
- Sorrow in sin (set apart from God) (4:9)
- Dependence on God (God is Lord over our lives) (4:10)

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