

Chapter III

IF ANY OF YOU LACK WISDOM

Many of the Jews of James's day believed if they were tempted, they were tempted of God. This was an error, as James pointed out in his letter to the Jews of the *diaspora*. Even so James used their pride of accomplishment and joy of endurance to speak to their hearts as a basis to examine their faith to see if it was, in any respect, *the faith once delivered unto the saints*. If their faith was indeed *the faith*, this alone would assure them they were *perfect and entire, wanting nothing*. If it was not, this would immediately establish their spiritual poverty. James addressed this issue when he stated: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him* (James 1:5).

This verse presents the central theme of James's epistle. It presents it in the poetic language of Solomon, whose language should have been well known unto the Jews because, being a prophet, Solomon used wisdom in the book of Proverbs to speak of salvation in Jesus Christ when he wrote:

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Happy is the man that findeth wisdom [i.e., salvation in Jesus Christ], and the man that getteth understanding [the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God]. For the merchandise of it [salvation] is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She [salvation] is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days [eternal life] is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour [an incorruptible inheritance and glorification, reserved in heaven]. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace [the peace of God and peace with God]. She [salvation] is a tree of life to them that lay hold on her: and happy is everyone that retaineth her. (Proverbs 3:13-18)

The latter part of this quotation from Proverbs three implies, as translated, that it takes human effort to retain wisdom (salvation), but this is an unscriptural concept. In the original Hebrew, *happy is everyone that retaineth her* means *those who have her* [i.e., salvation] *are blessed*. Consequently James used the term *wisdom* to address the Jews of the Mediterranean world to bring this blessing upon them that they might enter into the truth Solomon expressed when he wrote, *For whoso findeth me* [wisdom, i.e., salvation] *findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the LORD* (Proverbs 8:35).

Before a man will ask for wisdom from God, he must recognize his need of the Savior. Most Jews believed themselves to be justified before God by their traditions. The idea of a Savior was a stumbling Stone and a Rock of offense to them. During the ministry of our Lord *it came to pass, that, as Jesus sat at meat in his [Levi's] house, many publicans and sinners sat also together with Jesus and his disciples: for there were many, and they followed him. And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners? When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Mark 2:15-17, emphasis mine).*

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The attitude of the Scribes and the Pharisees was a very prevalent attitude among the Jews. They sought to justify themselves by finding fault with others. This is the way of self-righteousness. In fact they sought to justify themselves by trying to find fault with the Lord Jesus Christ for extending His grace to the publicans and sinners with whom He ate. It is quite evident the scribes and Pharisees did not apply to themselves the truth that *there is not a just man upon the earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not* (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

All of the world needs the Great Physician. But all who are a part of this world do not, or will not, recognize their need of Him. It is only by the preaching of the Word of God and the convicting power of the Spirit of God that any of us comes to recognize our need of Him. When this occurs, through the work of the Spirit, God *giveth liberally and upbraideth not*. When God gives, He gives by grace, for the Scriptures tell us, *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast* (Ephesians 2:8-9). Despite the many covenant relationships God had with the patriarchs and Israel, salvation has always been by grace, because *there is not a just man upon the earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not*, and our Lord said, *I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*.

At this point in the narrative, there is a warning how the Jews should ask. They must ask with an unwavering faith, which is only possible when the Spirit of God quickens the individual. However in that day, as in our own day, there were those who made counterfeit professions of faith -- perhaps reasoning they could hold on to the traditions of Israel with one hand and give lip service to the Lord with the other. Consequently James asserted:

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But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways. (James 1:6-8, emphasis mine)

The unstable, two-faced man does not really have his trust in the Lord. He has a feigned faith. There were many in Israel who were like that. Jesus said, *This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me* (Mark 7:6b). The occasion when our Lord made this statement was when the Pharisees came accusing the disciples of eating without washing, contrary to the traditions of the elders. The Jews who accused the disciples were steeped in legalistic tradition, which had nothing to do with the truth of the Word of God. This induced our Lord to say:

Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandments of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: but ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye. (Mark 7:7-13, emphasis mine)

It is interesting to note, throughout the public ministry of our Lord, there were many in Israel who believed on Jesus. They knew Jesus was the Christ. Nevertheless they would not publicly confess Him lest they be excommunicated from the synagogue. Apparently their position in Judaism was more important to them than salvation and the truth of the Word of God.

It is safe to assume that the present-day practice of the Jews, which is to consider a Jew who has converted to Christianity to be dead, was practiced then as now. Excommunication from

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the synagogue meant banishment from Jewish society. The synagogue was the center of Jewish life. The ability to earn a living and all social intercourse centered around the synagogue, as well as acceptance of the individual by the Jewish community as a whole. Undoubtedly this is the reason the early church, which was made up entirely of Jews, found it necessary to live communally and share their wealth. They had been banished from Jewish society.

Our Lord's instructions that he who seeks to save his life will lose it has its primary fulfillment during the great tribulation period, which is yet to come. Even so there is an application of this truth to all men in every age -- towards Jesus Christ you cannot be double-minded. The wisdom promised of God requires a positive, unwavering faith in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Such a faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit of God through the preaching of the Word of God and His quickening power. It cannot be humanly generated.

But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: that the saying of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because that Isaiah said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them. These things said Isaiah, when he saw his glory, and spake of him. Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. (John 12:37-43, emphasis mine)

The instructions of James to the Jews is predicated on his deep understanding of them as a people. James knew the emptiness of their professions and the shallowness of their understanding. James knew the Jews sought to establish their own righteousness before God. He knew the Jews rejected the concept of imputed righteousness. Therefore James made the terms of his presentation to the Jews very plain. He preached to them as our Lord had preached to them. It

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was incumbent upon James to show the Jews they were under the condemnation of the law, which he used lawfully, to make the Jews to whom he wrote receptive to the grace of God. Consequently the method of James with the Jews of the *diaspora* was akin to the method of our Lord with the rich young ruler:

And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God. Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother. And he answered and said unto him, Master, all these have I observed from my youth. Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying and went away grieved: for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:17-22, emphasis mine)

According to the eighth verse of the fifteenth chapter of Romans, Christ was a minister to the circumcision, which means He ministered to the Jews. This ministry was predicated of law because of the Mosaic covenant. Consequently everything Jesus preached and said to the Jews during his public ministry must be understood in the light of the Mosaic Covenant. This is the reason our Lord told the rich young ruler, who asked how to inherit eternal life, to keep the law. Our Lord used the law in its *schoolmaster* role to bring the young man unto Christ, that he might be justified by faith.

It must be understood, the Jews could not be justified by the law any more than Gentiles can. Even so the Jews' covenant relationship required obedience to the law. Once the law established the guilt of its offenders, then the offenders were to make the appropriate sacrifice, declaring their faith in the Kinsman Redeemer Who was to come. This is how the law worked as a *schoolmaster* to bring them to Christ so that they might be justified by faith. This concept of

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the law was almost totally lost to the Jews of the first century. The traditions of the elders had obscured the concept of a Kinsman Redeemer by establishing self-righteousness through Rabbinical interpretations of the law.

The young man who had come inquiring of our Lord the things necessary to inherit eternal life was no doubt steeped in the commandments and doctrines of men. When he was confronted with keeping the ten commandments, he asked, *Which?* Then our Lord quoted five of the last six commandments, dividing one into two parts, but omitting the commandment which dealt with covetousness. The young man replied, *All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet* (Matthew 19:20)?

The young man must have known he was not perfect before the law. Otherwise he never would have asked the question, *What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* Nor would he have responded, *What lack I yet?* Apparently the young man wanted our Lord to tell him he was just before the law, even though, subconsciously, he must have known he was not. Our Lord invoked the lawful use of the law with him, but He used only those commandments which had to do with man's relationship with man and said nothing to him about man's relationship with God. Then our Lord answered the second inquiry of the young man: *Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come take up the cross, and follow me.* With this statement our Lord reached into the young man's heart and proved him guilty of covetousness.

James tells us, *Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.* The law required a perfect performance for justification. Since *there is not a just man*

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upon the earth, that doeth good and sinneth not, no one can be just before the law. This is why our Lord said to the young man, *Take up the cross, and follow me*. Under the covenant relationship which God had with the nation of Israel, the cross was a sign of a curse. In effect He said to the young man, *You are cursed by the law, follow me for grace*. Paul quoted this aspect of the Jews' covenant relationship with God to the Galatians, to divert them from their perverted interest in the law because of the Judaizers, when he wrote: *For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them* (Galatians 3:10, emphasis mine). And he also wrote: *Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree* (Galatians 3:13, emphasis mine).

This means: *the following of Jesus* can only be done by grace. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Kinsman Redeemer promised in all of the sacrifices from the garden of Eden to the cross of Calvary. Under the terms of the covenant of law, a sacrifice for sin was made when the law had been violated. The young man should have understood what Jesus meant when He said, *Take up your cross and follow me*, but at the time, apparently, he did not.

The young man was double-minded. The Scripture says, *a double minded man is unstable in all his ways*. So the young man rejected his only means of justification by clinging for hope to the law which condemned him. This is the kind of thinking that James addressed in his epistle. This type of thinking is not common only to the Jews. It is very prevalent among the Gentiles as well. Man seeks to be justified by his own behavior, rather than by the grace of God, knowing full well his behavior condemns him before a Just and Holy God.

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Regarding the young man, the Scripture says Jesus loved him. Nevertheless Jesus had to let him go. The inexorable Word of God declares there is only one way to enter into eternal life. It is by grace through faith in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing can change this, not even the love of Christ for an individual sinner, unless that sinner comes unto God by Him.

God in His infinite Love and Grace has made provision for man through the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was accomplished in the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God before the foundation of the world and shall be completed through the death, burial, resurrection and return of our Lord to this earth. Thus the salvation that is available in Jesus Christ is the only means by which God can be Just and the Justifier of him who does no more than believe in Jesus. This plan of salvation, of which Christ is the Author and Finisher, satisfies God's Holiness, Righteousness and Justice, as well as His Love, Mercy and Grace.