

The right kind of wisdom

Who is wise and understanding among you? Do you think you are? Do you think the people around you are?

How can it be that we might not be prepared to claim that we are wise and understanding ourselves, but that others do see wisdom and understanding within us.

When James asks the question at the start of our epistle reading today, he says “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.” James spells out what I think most of us will already know, perhaps what we’ve learned from experience: We will know who is wise and understanding, not because they put up their hand when asked, but because we see their wisdom and understanding showing in their lives – we see their good lives, the good deeds they do, and we see that they have done those things humbly.

James contrasts the wisdom that comes from God, with wisdom as the world so often sees it: “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.” (James 3:14-15)

I commented last week that we need to choose our words not only wisely, but faithfully and graciously as well, because we can wisely choose words that will hurt. Similarly, we can make wise choices and take actions which set out to advantage ourselves (or those we love) and disadvantage others.

The worldly view of wisdom revolves around how smart we are, and how much we know, and what we can get out of it.

But the wisdom that the Bible speaks about doesn’t focus on how much we know, but on what sort of person we are. Godly wisdom is never boastful, instead it’s humble and practical. James is clear on where our boasting arrogance and self-importance come from – it’s earthly, unspiritual and even demonic.

And not only does James tell us where it comes from, but where it leads: For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (3:16)

It’s a serious warning to us. Particularly to us – we are wealthy people, we’re well-educated, we’re knowledgeable, we have an immense variety of practical skills, we’re well read, and we have pretty much the sum of the world’s knowledge at our fingertips.

We heard in our gospel reading today, about the teachers of the law, who were wealthy and knowledgeable, but they were arrogant in their wealth and power. Jesus said “They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect [...] and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. [...] and for a show make lengthy prayers.”

We’re not like that, are we? But the challenge from James is to ask us “What are we doing with what we have?”. What do we use all our wealth and knowledge and skills and access and “wisdom” for?

Most people in the world will use it to build more wealth and knowledge and access and power. But what will our choice be? What will our wise choice be? What will our wise and Godly choice be?

From talking about the teachers of the law, Jesus goes on to point out the widow putting everything she had into the temple offering. She's often held up as an example of sacrificial giving in Christian circles – she gave out of her poverty. Have you ever heard someone say, “It's not really giving, unless it hurts”?

But I don't think that's the lesson that Jesus was teaching here: Rather, it was to point out the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law, who would allow this woman to give all she had to support the temple – to support them.

Paul said that God loves a joyful giver. Our giving – out of the wealth that we have been blessed with – shouldn't hurt (although we might miss out on spending in on some of the luxuries of modern life), instead, it should be a joy that we should have the means and privilege of contributing to the growth of God's kingdom.

James gives us this wonderful description of Godly wisdom when he says “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.” (James 3:17-18)

I hear those two verses, and my mind leaps to the sermon on the mount – the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-9) “Blessed are the poor in spirit.. Blessed are the meek... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers” James would likely have been there to hear that sermon.

Even more, though, than James' writing reflecting the sermon on the mount, it's reflecting Jesus himself. As we read the gospels, we see Jesus showed what James says is the wisdom that comes from heaven; first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

We need to remember that as we read the letter of James, because people will sometimes say it doesn't present the gospel. And yes, there is no declaration that Jesus died for our sins, but it does point to Jesus. What James teaches fits in with what Jesus taught – and with what Paul and Peter and John, and all the other writers of the scriptures teach too.

As Paul writes “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) What James writes is part of ‘all scripture’, and his particular focus is on training in righteousness and equipping his readers – us – for every good work.

And so, as we move to chapter 4, James asks us “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” James has spoken about peace, but now he asked about fights and quarrels.

We know that we shouldn't fight. We know that we should be peacemakers. And yet we fight. We disagree. We quarrel. Of course, we can always come up with justification for our fighting.

Nation rises against nation. Nations are divided within. Families fight and quarrel. People in workplaces fight and quarrel. People in churches fight and quarrel. As I reflected last week, our words can lead to violence – and of course, the words we choose can injure and scar for life.

James asks what causes fights, and then suggests an answer – “Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” he challenges.

Do our fights, our quarrels, our disagreements come from our desires?

How does that idea sit with you?

The word translated as ‘desires’ is the Greek ‘hedone’ – which gives us the English word ‘hedonism’ – the idea that pleasure or happiness is the highest good. It gives us the goals of eating, drinking and being merry ... the pleasures of the flesh. In pursuit of pleasure, we end up being self-indulgent and self-important.

In workplaces and organisations and even in families and churches, this self-centredness is often focused on getting our own way. But we can’t all get our own way... and naturally fighting and quarrels ensue.

James says that “You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.”

That makes sense: we desire what we don’t have. We covet what we want. Whether it’s money, or power, or pleasure, or relationship – we want what we don’t have. We might think that we don’t have it because we don’t have the opportunities or the connections or the wealth.

But James says, no, you don’t have what you want, not because of those reasons, but he says at the end of verse 2, “You do not have because you do not ask God.”

We do not have because we do not ask God.

Aha! It’s easy, then: if we want the money and power and pleasure and relationships we can just ask God, right?

Well, no. And while all those things are in the power of God to give, we know from our own experience, that things don’t work that way. We want things, we even pray for them, but we don’t receive.

James tells us, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

We do need to pray for ourselves, and for each other, and for the world. We are called to do so.

Many years ago, I did a stint of Sunday School teaching, I was teaching eight-year-olds, and I introduced a time of prayer by saying “Who knows what it means to pray?” One boy, put his hand up straight away. “Yes, Andrew?” “It’s when you ask God for stuff.”

That answer has stuck with me. Because our prayers are often when we simply ask God for stuff. They can easily be selfish prayers – or self-important prayers: We can get very specific in our prayers and give God detailed instructions on what God should be doing to solve all our problems.

Not just our problems either – but all the problems of the world. We can look at a conflict, and helpfully tell God who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, and exactly what God should do to make sure the good guys win.

Just because our prayers aren’t answered, though, doesn’t mean that we had the wrong motives. Throughout Christian history, people have contemplated why faithful prayers aren’t

answered – and I’m sure you’ve heard most of the standard explanations, about God’s timing and not ours, or about God answering the prayer that we would have prayed if we knew all that God knew.

I’m fond of the saying that God answers all prayers, but sometimes the answer is simply “No”.

At our men’s discussion group last Wednesday, Mike reflected that Jesus’ own prayer to God the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” hadn’t been answered in the way Jesus would have hoped.” Yes, he prayed that he might avoid the suffering to come, but it wasn’t to be: “Yet not as I will, but as you will,” he prayed too.

Our reading today skips a few verses, before concluded with this:

Be subject therefore to God. But resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

The Greek word diabolos (devil) is the equivalent of the Hebrew word ‘satan’. In the Old Testament, Satan is an accuser in the heavenly court. In the New Testament, the devil takes on the character of a tempter here on Earth (Matthew 4:1-11; 1 Thessalonians 3:5).

We remember, particularly, the series of escalating temptations that the devil presented to Jesus in the wilderness. We are faced with temptations too... maybe not as obvious as those that Jesus faced. But temptations that will be hard to resist: to take the easy way out, to take an unfair advantage, to put others down.

But James tells us that, if we resist the devil, the devil will flee from us. If we turn our attention to God, we can resist the temptations of the devil and of the world. We pray it all the time “Save us from the time of trial” or in the older language “lead us not into temptation.”

Finally in our reading today, James urges us to “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” If we resist the devil he will flee... but if we draw near to God, then we can be sure that God will draw near to us.

We draw near to God through reading the scriptures, through praying, through worshipping God, and being involved in the life of his church. But beyond those actions, it also involves allowing ourselves to be changed – to becoming more like Jesus. To following God’s ways rather than the world’s ways.

Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Remember the parable of the prodigal son? When the prodigal son decided to return home, and decided to plead for mercy from his father, the father ran towards him and embraced him and celebrated his return – he didn’t give him the menial job that the son had hoped for but he restored him as his son.

That’s what it’s like when we turn to God: he welcomes us.

Friends, don’t look to the wisdom of the world. Don’t be like the pharisees who would aggrandize themselves at the expense of the widow. Resist the devil, and know that he will flee.

But most of all: Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

Amen.