

Exercising True Wisdom

James 3:13-4:3

Friends, history is full of little stories
where people have offered advice that has been way off the mark.

In 1927 H.M. Warner, one of the original warner brothers asked
“who on earth wants to hear actors talk? Let’s *not do* talking films!”

In 1944, Norma Jean Baker was told by a modeling agency
“You’d better learn secretarial work or else get married.”
Norma Jean Baker would become better known by her screen name:
Marilyn Monroe

Ten years later in 1954, Elvis Presley was told “You aint going nowhere Son.
You ought to go back to driving a truck”

After his first audition, Sidney Poitier was told to “stop wasting people’s time
and go out and become a dishwasher or something”. In 1964 he went out and
became the first black man to win an academy award.

Imagine if these pieces of advice had been taken seriously!
It just goes to show that even though people have wisdom to give,
it might not always be the best wisdom to receive.

Have you ever been the recipient of wisdom that was off the mark?
“Yes, those are good shares to invest in”
“Yes, you will look good with this type of haircut”
“No, I don’t think taking three children on a long haul flight is unmanageable”
Wisdom abounds, doesn’t it? But not all of it is worth believing!

This is a reality that the NT book of James seems to understand quite well.
James recognizes that we are all being influenced somehow,
and he wants us to think carefully about where that influence is coming from.
James speaks of two types of wisdom:
one that’s worth our attention and another that’s way off the mark.
He wants us to recognize both, but be influenced only by the one.

So what is the wisdom that James would have us pursue?
We’re in James ch3, verse 13
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.

When James introduces the concept of wisdom,
he’s drawing on a theme that is found throughout the Bible.
When King Solomon was in the early days of his reign,

God appeared to him in a dream and basically presented a blank cheque:
“Ask for whatever you want me to give you”

Solomon could have asked for a long life, he could have asked for wealth,
But instead he asked for wisdom.

I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties he said

(he was speaking metaphorically – he was a grown man by this stage)

Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people

and to distinguish between right and wrong

And God was so pleased with this answer

that not only did he grant Solomon’s request
but he gave Solomon great wealth anyway.

In the New Testament, we read that, from a very young age,

Jesus was known for his wisdom.

As a boy in the temple at Jerusalem,

everyone was amazed at his understanding and answers.

Luke tells us that he young Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature

And so *being wise* is a Biblical ideal; as Christian people we want to be wise.

But when the Bible speaks about wisdom, what precisely is it describing?

What exactly does it mean to be wise?

Well, King Solomon said that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

We start along the path of true wisdom once we realize that there is a God,

and that he is ruling on his throne,

and that we have been made to worship him.

According to the Bible, true wisdom comes once you adopt this worldview,

a worldview which says God is the one in charge, not us.

And so James can say in the second half of v13

that wisdom is characterized by *humility*;

the humble recognition of our place in this world under God.

Think of the smartest person you know.

Maybe it’s a teacher that you once knew,

Maybe one of your workmates.

They might know a lot about science or literature or how the world works.

Maybe there’s no problem they can’t fix.

But if they haven’t been humbled by the reality and majesty of God,

if they haven’t developed a healthy ‘fear of the Lord’,

then they are yet to become wise in the Biblical sense of the term.

You hear this humility on Solomon’s response don’t you?

“Lord, You’ve made me king, but I am way out of my depth.

I need you to help me.”

And James says, “Let this be the wisdom that we aim for.”

Of course, it wasn't just readers of the OT who wanted to be wise in James' time.
Paul tells us that the Greeks aspired to be wise too.
No one in ancient times really wanted to be foolish,
But James is aware that what people pass off as wisdom can vary greatly.

He's reminded us of the shape of biblical wisdom,
and now he seeks to expose the false wisdom that was being circulated.
Verse 14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts,
do not boast about it or deny the truth.

There are many ugly sins that we can wear on the outside:
But in v14 James mentions two sins that we can keep hidden within us

He speaks of *Bitter envy*:
"I wish I had her looks" [health]
"I wish I had the job that he was able to land" [his money]
"Look at the pathetic family that I've been lumped with.
That other household have the life I always thought I would have."
It's the little voice of discontent and jealousy
that's sparked by what you see in others.

James also speaks of *selfish ambition*
Whereas better envy says *I wish I wish I wish*
Selfish ambition says *I will I will I will*
"I will become the best at what I do"
"I will end up ahead of all the others"
"I will obtain all the things that I desire"

This was the wisdom that was circulating in ancient times:
*Have a look around, work out what you want,
and make sure you beat everyone else to the top*

You still see this wisdom articulated today.
We've had a revolving door of Prime Ministers over the last decade,
and some people simply see this as the inevitable cost of political ambition.

There was one newspaper article a few years back that made this statement:
*"Malcolm Turnbull has an enormous ego, which is critical for leadership", the
article said. "It takes a certain arrogance to want to lead. Kevin Rudd wasn't
seconded to leadership kicking and screaming. He wanted it badly. He got it.
Men who have no ambition do not know true north.*

Did you hear that last line? *Men who have no ambition do not know true north.*
If you want to be a man heading in the right direction, then get ambitious.
What would James say it means to find true north?
He'd say you find your direction by recognizing your position before God

and adopting the appropriate humility.

Now, there's nothing wrong with wanting to be good at what you do.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to achieve great things.

The problem is *selfish* ambition:

ambition that cares only about *your* goals
and doesn't flinch at the prospect of running over others to get there;
So...the worker who places pressure on a colleague
to stay back and work on their own project,
the mother who leans heavily on a child to achieve great things
so that *she* has something to boast about;
the Father who neglects their family because *he* wants the successful career.

You can start to see the destructive power of bitter envy and selfish ambition.

Allowing these feelings to fester is the perfect way to ruin relationships.

And it's little wonder that James goes on to say that this so-called 'wisdom' comes straight from the devil – vs 15-16 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

Satan wants us to turn on each other,

and envy and ambition are surefire ways to bring that about.

It's ironic, isn't it? We think we are serving ourselves
but in reality we are serving the Devil himself.

So if the wisdom we want to pursue is of a more humble nature,

then what does it look like in practice? James gives us two examples

Have a listen for the repeated concept in verses 17-18. 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. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Did you pick it up? James mentions peace three times:

He speaks of wisdom that is *peace-loving*,

And he speaks of *peacemakers* who sow in *peace*.

There are many arenas where it's a challenge to bring *peace* instead of *conflict*.

Are you a peacemaker in your marriage?

Are you a peacemaker in your family?

One area which is a challenge is with the neighbors, isn't it?

Our nightly current affairs shows thrive on neighbourhood disputes,

And here in the church we are not immune!

A few years ago in a church where I used to work

we had these magnificent two trees on the church property,

and they were poisoned overnight!

Holes were drilled around the base of each trunk and filled with poison.

Not long after I received a call from an angry neighbor.

“It was you guys who poisoned your own trees,” he said.

“You probably want to build a carpark! That’s why you did it!

I’m on the warpath!” he said. “I know a lawyer!” [they all know lawyers!]

I tell you what I wanted to say. I wanted to say

“You’re mad. You’re probably the one who did it,
and now you’re blaming us, because you’re crazy.”

I managed to not say that, I said something like

“Sir, I can assure you, we don’t want to ruin your house with a carpark,
we have every desire to obey the council regulations,
and we miss those trees as much as you do.”

I haven’t always been so gracious.

But with the help of the Holy Spirit, what was I able to do in this instance?

I was able to exercise some of the other virtues in these verses:

James tells us to be *considerate*: to understand their point of view.

He tells us to be *sincere*: to speak truthfully and not to make things up.

The conversation ended with him saying “You haven’t heard the last of this!”

But as it turned out that was the last we heard,

he never got a lawyer and he didn’t complain any further. Peace was sown.

The poisoner was never found or prosecuted; he (or she) got away with it.

But to make peace is wise living.

Worldly wisdom may have suggested that I let him know his place,

That I knock him down so that he learns his lesson.

That I embarrass him, or shame him, because that’s what he deserves.

But Biblical wisdom suggests I exercise some humility and make peace.

Biblical wisdom also suggests I think carefully how I deal with my internal desires.

James could perceive how our cravings can lead to some horrendous actions,

Ch4:1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? ²You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.

We spoke earlier about Solomon’s wisdom,

his father David fell into the trap of letting desire lead him into sin.

He saw Bathsheba bathing and desired to have her

and so he arranged for her husband to be killed.

He desired, but he could not have, so he killed., just as James describes.

Has your desire ever led you to head down an unsavory path?

Has bitter envy ever broken up a friendship?

Has your selfish ambition ever turned people away from you?

Maybe its our material desires that cause fights in the home
as we quarrel over how we spend our money.

It's a constant of human experience that James is describing.

The Buddhist religion sees the same problem.

Like James, Buddhism recognizes the suffering that is caused by desire,
and the Buddhist solution is to rid yourself of all desire through meditation.

That's not the solution that James places before us, rather once more,

James would have us exercise the humility that's born from Biblical wisdom.

You do not have because you do not ask God. He explains When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

The right way to deal with desire

is to be humble enough to recognize God as *both*
the *giver* of good things and as the *definer* of good things.

If we want something, then bring it before God.

There's no point going to war against other people

when you have access to the one who holds all things in his storeroom.

Don't waste your time getting jealous, spend your time asking God.

Kerry Packer once said "Don't get bitter. Get better" There's some wisdom!

James would say something slightly different.

"Don't get bitter, pray to the one who is better"

And if what we want is more selfish than helpful then sure, God might withhold it.

James wants us to recognize that it *is* possible that the reason God says *no*
is because our focus is in the wrong place.

It's not the only reason God might say no, but it is one possibility.

But I trust that as we grow in our faith

our desires will align more and more with God's desires,

and we will discover a whole raft of prayers that God is wanting to say *yes* to.

If you're sick of God not answering your prayers,

then spend sometime praying about something else,

maybe you'll discover the thing that he really does want to say *yes* to.

We've been talking about wisdom.

Sometimes we reject people's wisdom because it just sounds so implausible

My parents tell me that there are some plants I should aggressively prune.

It doesn't seem right to take to the plants in the way they suggest

but they know more about this than me.

In a similar way, the advice to act with great humility seems counter intuitive,

but I want us to take note of one phrase that is repeated in this passage.

James calls this approach the 'wisdom from Heaven'.
This wisdom has come from God,
and it's a wisdom that was practiced by the man from Heaven: Jesus Christ.
In great humility he gave up his own honor
to become the great peacemaker, did he not?
And so friends this wisdom is trustworthy; its God's wisdom,
handed down by him, and practiced by the same.

Pray.