

Wisdom from Above – James 3:13-18

Are you a wise person? How do you know? And what is that determines if someone's wise anyway?

Our passage in James today sits as a bridge between last week's teaching about the impacts of our words our tongues on other people and next week's passage that looks at the underlying cause of quarrels and fights that we have with each other.

And James' purpose in this bridge is to remind us about the centrality of 'wisdom' in the life of every Christian as the answer to the issues in the passages both before and after.

For James wisdom is foundational for right living as a Christian in the world.

You might remember that back at the start of his book in chapter 1 verse 5 James insisted that 'If any[one] is lacking in wisdom, [they are to] ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given [to them].

This means that the wisdom James is referring to comes from God from heaven if you like and isn't bound up with what we often think of when we talk about people being wise.

James' view of 'heavenly' wisdom isn't wisdom that's measured by someone's intellect or knowledge or theological expertise, not that these are bad things, but is primarily measured by the witness of a person's good life and the humble deeds of their lived experience - 'Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom' (v13).

James redefines wisdom for us, he redefines it in terms of our behaviours and relationships rather than in our brain power or intellectual cleverness, which the world tends to look to as the example of wisdom.

But notice with me that James is also careful to show that it's NOT that performing good deeds is what makes us wise, BUT rather, that our good deeds are a response to God's heavenly wisdom which reveals whether we are truly wise.

James says that wisdom from God is something that can be shown in a person's life and that this heavenly wisdom does not exist if it is not shown.

Ouch that's rather pointy!

Doesn't that make you feel like you want to immediately foster 10 Compassion children to show everyone you're a wise Christian and put a post on Facebook to tell everyone what you've done in order to encourage them to do the same?

Well if you did, that would miss the point wouldn't it? Because James stresses the importance that these good deeds are done in gentleness, or better translated as meeekness, which comes from this God-given wisdom.

James purposefully uses the same word for meekness that Jesus uses in other places in the Bible to describe a heart attitude and behaviour of self-subduing gentleness, which is as much counter-cultural today as it was when James wrote this letter.

You'll already know that meekness is usually identified as a form of weakness or even grovelling submission, but here James points out that meekness is what proves our participation in this wisdom from heaven.

In other words, meekness in our living for God in this world is a sign of God's heavenly wisdom in action in our life.

But James knows that meekness isn't something that people tend to aspire to. In fact, he says in v14 that earthly wisdom and thinking means people tend to hold onto petty jealousies, or selfish ambitions and rivalries, even within our own church communities, which is the place where Christian unity and harmony is meant to be practiced and demonstrated.

He points to our own hypocrisy in claiming to be 'wise Christians' while at the same time harbouring envy or jealousy of someone at church, or in maintaining a selfish ambition to get our own way, or creating cliques by promoting a split that we justify as 'standing for the truth', or simply working to get something done in order to meet our own needs.

James says that we are lying to ourselves, we are 'false to the truth', in thinking that any of these heart attitudes and behaviours reflect God's wisdom from heaven.

In fact, James points out in 3:15 that this type of self-seeking thinking and earthly wisdom is nothing more than a human response that is disconnected from the Spirit of God, motivated by evil, and fundamentally demonic in its intent.

Fundamentally demonic in its intent, and we're talking about church; that's strong language.

When we hear the word 'demonic' we often think of the mysterious or occultic dimension of things like witchcraft, or possession, or evil spiritual beings lurking in the shadow of darkness, but James says that demonic activity is also experienced in behavioural and relational terms, in things like envy and selfish ambition in place of meekness, as evidence of the devil's work within a church community.

He says that we see the evidence of this pride-filled earthly thinking and wisdom in the conflict, confusion, chaos and disorder surfacing within our churches, and their resulting practices and behaviours that are simply ungodly, and even evil ; all happening in the name of God.

So in v17 James calls us to check our 'wisdom compass' and to reorient it to true north; to change our attitudes and behaviours away from earthly wisdom toward heavenly wisdom, whose character is pure and seeks after peace, is gentle, meek, reasonable and accommodating, merciful and spiritually fruitful, one that is fair-minded and sincere in relationships.

These are the signs of heavenly wisdom given by God and all we need do is ask Him to receive it.

It is a wisdom that grows the fruit of the spirit within our own lives (which you can read about for yourselves in Galatians 5:22), a wisdom that sows the seeds of salvation into the lives of other people looking on at the example of how we live as a Christian in the world; it is a wisdom that demonstrates the peace of God in action.

James says that God's peace is the good soil, the good soil in which the seeds of salvation can be sown; and God's peacemakers, the people who live righteous lives according to God's wisdom, are the gardeners who tend to the care, the cultivation, and the fruitfulness of its harvest.

That it is meekness rather than the divisiveness of worldly envy and ambition that brings about this peace through God's wisdom at work within our church community.

As we continue to be physically separated by coronavirus at this time, together though apart, as the community of God's people, James reminds us that the example of our good lives matters. That a good life is compelled by heavenly wisdom and filled with works of service. That we must all work for God's peace in our church community and beyond.

When coronavirus is finally contained, and life returns to a new normal, what will you have cultivated in your life and the lives of others that reflects this heavenly wisdom of God?

Ask yourself, what kind of seed am I sowing?