

Wisdom from Above
Sept. 22, 2024, HMC
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James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understandable among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be arrogant and lie about the truth. This is not wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

Introduction

It is good to be back with you all this week after my recent illness with Covid. For a few days I could barely talk without fits of coughing and so I watched church on the computer. Thankfully Julie and I are feeling much better, but the effects of covid brain still linger. I'm grateful to Ginny, Wayne, and others for taking up the slack while I was home. I'm sorry that we couldn't have our first Sunday School class last week, but we should be able to get things going this week right after worship. We'll be looking at the theology of John Hus.

If you've been attending regularly for the past several weeks you may have noticed that we have been hearing a lot from the book of James in the New Testament. James is one of the shorter books of the Bible, but it is very interesting book. Some of you have told me that James is among your favorite

books in Bible because it is so clear and practical. Not everyone esteems the book of James so highly. The famous theologian Martin Luther famously called James “an epistle of straw” because it lacked the theological depth found in Paul’s letters. But James was a favorite text for the early Moravian church, and it merits our attention.

Churches of the diaspora

James is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the diaspora” or dispersion rather than to a specific church or person, which is intriguing. This is not like the letter to the Corinthians or Romans, for example. It was written for all churches. The diaspora or dispersion refers to the scattering of the tribes of Israel that resulted from multiple foreign conquests. By the time James was writing, there were Jewish synagogues in almost every city from Babylon to Spain. This Jewish diaspora was the first “virtual community” in which people who were separated by geography managed to maintain some type of identity through the written word and prayers.

The New Testament sometimes uses the term diaspora to refer to the Christian community scattered across the ancient world. Within a century of the resurrection there were Christian congregations in most cities of the ancient world. Christians did not need temples and shrines. They could worship Jesus anywhere and anytime just by praying, studying, and living according to the teachings of Jesus. Christian churches were connected to other Christian communities in a virtual community through prayer, devotion, and the Holy Spirit. The book of James was also not written to address an immediate concern, but to teach all generations what it means to follow Christ and live in community.

James

According to ancient tradition, this book was written by James, the brother of Jesus, who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He was a very important apostle, but it is interesting is that the author does not claim any special status or authority. He doesn’t say, I James the brother of Jesus and head of the church am speaking. Unlike Paul, who always has to tell people that he was an apostle or was highly educated, James simply says that he is a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The humility of his opening greeting is consistent with the themes of the letter. Do not listen to me because I am

so important, listen to me because what I have to say is important. It is the teaching, not the teacher that we should listen.

Wise people

Our text for this week begins with a deceptively simple question. Who is wise and understanding among you? It is one of those questions that you don't know if you are supposed to answer. I remember my teacher in high school English asking the class "what is a rhetorical question" and was disappointed that we didn't answer. Of course, we thought she was asking a rhetorical question that she planned to answer. I expect that James was expecting his listeners to answer this question by identifying people who were wise.

Look around you. Who in this room today do you consider wise and understanding? Don't shout out the answer, but who in this congregation or in your daily life do you consider wise? Who do you seek out when you need advice or help in thinking through a decision? What are they like? What is it that distinguishes wise people from wise guys or smart alecks?

I was blessed by having many wise men and women around me when I was growing up, including my Boy Scout leaders, youth fellowship leaders, teachers, and neighbors. They were not all well-educated and certainly they weren't wealthy, but they were wise. I didn't always follow their advice, and I made plenty of mistakes, but they often helped me learn from those mistakes. Wise people tend to choose their words carefully and speak after thinking. They learn from the past, but they also look ahead to see where things may go. When the right decision is clear, they tend to act decisively, but when it is not clear they seek more information. Wise people tend to listen to the views of others without simply being swayed by opinions and strong emotions. They tend to be fair in their dealings with others rather than simply supporting people they like or getting caught up in other people's enthusiasm.

James says recognize who is wise because their good deeds demonstrate that they are wise. In other words, wisdom is not a matter of winning an argument or making speeches; it is your actions that demonstrate your wisdom. More importantly, James says, it is good deeds done in humility that mark people as wise.

One of the more depressing things about modern media, whether television or social media, is that so many people feel the need to broadcast their good deeds to the world. Look at me! I'm giving food to a hungry person. Look at me! I'm going to help poor people in another country. Look at me! I handed out water bottles. Sometimes this is done to encourage other people to help or to highlight a need in the community, which is good, but much of the time it is simply to make someone look good for the cameras. We call these "photo ops," and they are very popular among celebrities and politicians. Too often such photo ops are demeaning to the people who are in need of help. James says that this kind of attention-seeking is not a sign of wisdom and understanding. True wisdom is shown by good deeds done with humility. If you are doing good in the world, those who need to know will know.

Worldly wisdom

We sometimes hear the phrase "worldly wisdom" or "street smarts" in contrast to being naïve or gullible. The worldly wise are cynical manipulators who are looking out only for themselves. They bend the rules and exploit other people to get what they want. Movies and television shows often celebrate this kind of shrewdness. You know, "he's a rogue cop who lives by his own rules." We hear about entrepreneurs breaking the rules to get rich or people who want little anything stop them from succeeding. James warns us against this kind of false wisdom. He says that this kind of selfish disregard comes from the devil, not from God.

James tell us that people acting primarily out of selfish ambition and envy cause disorder and conflict. Real harm is done by their selfishness. One of the major problems with the current economy is the breakdown of trust caused by greedy people who want to maximize their profits without concern for their customers or society. Just read the news about Boeing and other corporations who have lost the trust of workers and customers. We often call it shrewdness to enrich oneself at the expense of others, but James tell us it is really foolishness. We end up destroying the very thing we covet.

If you grew up on the Dr Seuss story the Lorax, you know the parable of the man who shrewdly amassed a fortune by cutting down truffala trees to make thneeds, but when the last of the trees was gone, he was reduced to living alone over his abandoned shop. It is not wisdom to destroy what you depend

on. Or as Proverbs says, those who trouble their households will inherit the wind.

Everywhere we turn, people glamorize greed and envy. Advertisers stoke our fear of missing out so much that it even has an acronym FOMO. They tell you that someone somewhere is having a better life than you are. You haven't got the coolest car, the hottest clothes, the sexiest shoes, or even the right water bottle. You haven't been to the hippest club or trendiest vacation spot. You should be envious of others and want what they have. We are told over and over that life is a competition and we don't even know what the prize is. Even in church, we fall prey to this worldly wisdom of endless striving and self-centered spirituality. You'd be amazed at the number of books on spirituality that are based on FOMO. Everywhere we are told to give into our cravings instead of exercising self-control and care for others.

Toxic cravings

But this is nothing new. James was writing in the earliest years of Christianity, long before advertising and media, and he could already see the dangers of worldly wisdom. James asks, "where do these conflicts and disputes come from?" So there must have been conflicts in the churches he was writing to. Conflict can be necessary and helpful as we struggle to good decisions or confront vexing problems, but James tells us that most conflicts come from ungodly cravings within us.

James says that envy leads to murder, which is often true, but I think he was exaggerating for effect. I doubt there were many murderers in the early church, but he knew that envy does cause conflict and harm. Harsh words can kill people's souls. We still see how envy harms others. We want to feel powerful, so we demean others. We want to be respected, so we diminish others. We see this in high school, in social clubs, in universities, in churches, and on Wall St. I'm often amused at men on social media who insist that they are "alpha males" as if their greatest ambition is to be the lead dog pulling a sled rather than being a fully functioning adult. The church is not free of this tendency to put others down. Too many people think that the way to prove there are righteous is by condemning and excluding others rather than helping them.

James tells us that true wisdom, the wisdom from God, is different from what passes for wisdom in the world. Divine wisdom leads to peacefulness rather than conflict. The truly wise know that sometimes you need to yield to someone rather than winning the argument. Sometimes you just need to let things be rather than proving that you are smarter and more powerful than someone else.

Have you ever seen two children playing with toys, and then one child notices that the other is happy with their toy, so they must have take it from them? There was peace and quiet and joy one moment and then there is screaming as a child who is afraid of missing out snatches the toy. Sometimes they fight over it until the toy breaks and then no one is happy. I think about that often these days as I watch politicians, celebrities, pastors, and other public figures fighting over things and destroying them. James urges us to embrace the wisdom from above that recognizes that we should seek the good of the group rather than just our own desires. True wisdom brings peacefulness, not more conflict.

Conclusion

Who are the wise and understanding in our world? James says that it is those who seek the good of everyone rather than their selfish desires; those who are willing to compromise for the good of the community; those who build others up instead of demeaning them. The wise let God heal their hearts, illuminate their minds, and purify their desires. Who are wise and understanding among us? I hope it is each one of us. Amen.