

Wisdom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 March 2020

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] The book of Proverbs, and the second reading later on from James. So first of all, the book of Proverbs, and we're reading chapter 4. That's on, should be on page 638.

Proverbs chapter 4. We can read verses 1 down to verse 9. Proverbs 4, verses 1 down to 9. Let's hear the word of God. Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction. Pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning.

So do not forsake my teaching. When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, lay hold of my words with all your heart.

Keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding. Do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom and she will protect you.

[1 : 09] Love her and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme. Therefore, get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

Esteem her and she will exalt you. Embrace her and she will honor you. She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor.

We can read James in a short while. Before we read James, let's now sing again together. James. James chapter 3. We can read from verses 13 down to verse 18.

James 3 verses 13 to 18. Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

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 and spiritual of the devil.

[2 : 23] For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. For 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 raise a harvest of righteousness.

We give praise to God for his word. To that passage that Donald read for us from the letter of James. It's on page 1215 chapter 3 verses 13 to 18.

We're going to ask ourselves the question this evening. Are you wise? That was something of a refrain of my teenage years. I can't say that without thinking of my mother.

I was not blessed with a great amount of common sense. Are you wise? Is that what it's about? Is it about common sense? That's one of the things we're going to think about. How do you and I measure wisdom? What is wisdom when we get down to it?

[3 : 30] So we read from Proverbs 4, Solomon's advice to his son. Saying that wisdom is something to pursue and value in our lives.

And then we sang the wisdom psalm, Psalm 1. Telling us there's a wise and a foolish way to live. There's the way of the righteous and there's the way of the wicked.

And the Bible is full of wisdom. The letter of James is described as wisdom literature within the New Testament. So the question is, are we wise?

Do we know what wisdom is? What does it look like? And as important for James here, are we following the way of wisdom?

I guess when we try and define wisdom, it can be somewhat of a slippery term. We can perhaps find it quite hard to assess ourselves or to assess others.

[4 : 26] And I want to suggest that James here in his letter gives us some really helpful pointers. He'll tell us, he'll show us what wisdom looks like.

That's his concern, not merely what does it sound like. It's not about pure philosophy. It's about lived out experience. And he's also concerned about the attitude that lies behind true wisdom.

So it's not, and maybe this is how we think, it's not about how clever we are. Our grades, our tests are not the measure of whether we are wise people or not.

Nor, according to James, is it about our philosophy, our wise sayings, our smart comments. They are not the measure of whether we are a wise person.

Rather, it's got a lot to do with how we live. God's wisdom is humble. True wisdom is humble. True wisdom, it leads to good deeds.

[5 : 30] True wisdom is about relationships and it promotes peace. So we have some important pointers towards what true wisdom looks like.

And what becomes clear, when you look at this letter, this first century letter, James is writing to a church that really needs to learn to choose right wisdom.

A challenge for the first century church, challenge for the 21st century church is the same. That we would let God's will and God's will and God's values and God's wisdom direct the church to direct the thinking of us as Christian people, not our culture.

So here in James' letter, you can detect some of what we might describe the wisdom of the world in the first century. Particularly, we can see attitudes about pride and self-promotion coupled with envy and jealousy towards those who are seen to be higher up the social pecking order.

And the result, and we see it again in this letter within this church, in chapter 2, following the wrong wisdom has led to them neglecting the poor and the weak.

[6 : 46] They're not doing wisdom in terms of caring for the weak and showing mercy. In chapter 3, just before where we've got to, they are clearly having a problem with how they are speaking to and about one another, using their tongues in destructive ways.

And then the section immediately after, beginning of chapter 4, we see a church that's fighting, quarreling, competing with one another, following the wisdom of the world, where to be number one is to be everything.

It's still the temptation and the danger for us today to absorb the wisdom of the world rather than to be guided by the world. By God's word.

And some of the qualities of worldly wisdom that we find here, we can still see today, can't we? It talks about envy, selfish ambition, bitter envy.

When we think about how maybe whether it's social media, whether it's newspapers, magazines, there does seem to be a delight in a wisdom that tears down.

[7 : 55] There does seem to be a delight in sort of vindictive attack using wisdom to make others feel small.

We think about what happens in a tragedy like Caroline Flack and we see that's part of our culture's way of talking about others.

Harsh and divisive words. You think about how politicians speak about one another. We hear about how politicians are spoken about.

And we recognize harsh and divisive words. We see bitterness. We see envy. Self-promotion that says my rights are what matters regardless of who it impacts.

And some of that is the air that we breathe. Therefore, we need to be very careful that the wisdom we follow is true wisdom, that it's God's wisdom, that it promotes peace and it leads to a good life.

[9 : 00] So, using this section of the letter, let's ask three questions for measuring wisdom. First one, what does your wisdom look like?

Verse 13 starts in perhaps a surprising way. Who is wise and understanding among you, let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Wisdom is something that should be seen. James is challenging the first century church. You're claiming to be wise. Well, let's see your life to back that up.

Wisdom is a way of life that involves following God's way. You know, we talk about talk being cheap. James is saying to the church, I'm not interested in your profession with your words.

Are you doing wisdom? Wisdom. And so, he says to them, one of the things that wisdom leads to significantly is that wisdom leads to humility.

[10 : 05] So, how does that work? What's the connection between wisdom and humility? Well, in chapter 1 and verse 5, we're told something important about wisdom. James gives advice to the church.

If you are lacking wisdom, where do you go? And James says you should go to God who gives that wisdom generously. So, from the beginning, the Bible is saying true wisdom comes from outside of

ourselves, and therefore, there's humility involved to receive it.

There's also humility involved to say, I need God's wisdom. Back in chapter 1, wisdom begins with turning to God, praying to God, seeking the wisdom that we do not have in and of ourselves.

So, there's a vital connection between wisdom and humility. Further, when we think about God's wisdom as we think about his way of salvation, and Donald read for us from 1 Corinthians, God's wisdom shows us our folly, shows us our inability, shows us our need of God's grace, so that we cannot receive God's wisdom and stay proud.

The two just do not go together. Jesus is the wisdom from God. And what did Paul say about Jesus as the wisdom from God? He is our righteousness.

[11 : 35] So, there's no room for pride that says, well, I can be good enough for God. No, wisdom is humble enough to say that if I am going to be accepted by God, then that needs to be on the basis of what Jesus has done for me.

Jesus is my holiness. If I am to be set apart as belonging to God, that does not come from myself and my own innate goodness.

I need to rest and rely on the holiness of Jesus. Jesus, as the wisdom from God, Paul says, is our redemption. So, again, that humbles us because it reminds us that by nature, we stand as slaves to sin.

We are locked in patterns of being and behaving that tend not towards God, but away from God. And unless Jesus comes to perform that rescue by dying on the cross, we will always be separate from God.

And so, there is something essential connecting God's wisdom and our humility. The gospel itself should always leave us humbled.

[12 : 45] So, wisdom leads to humility, but wisdom also leads to good deeds in verse 13. If you're wise and understanding, show it by your good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

So, he's speaking to our people who are humbled by God's grace, who are led by the spirit of Christ, not led by the wisdom of the world.

And he's saying those people, Christian people, are to regularly and repeatedly choose the way of Jesus. Now, I say that because as much as we would love it to be the case that a person would trust in Jesus and then we would instinctively always tend towards wisdom, when we look into our own hearts and we look into our decisions, we know that's not always the case.

There is a conscious and constant decision we need to make to pursue the wisdom of God, even as there is that other voice telling us, there's another wisdom to follow, the wisdom of the world.

And James goes there in verse 14. Remember, he's speaking to the church, speaking to Christians. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

[14 : 13] We think about harbors in two ways. We think about boats coming into harbor. But we can also think from a police point of view that we are, you know, it is against the law to harbor illegals.

It's against the law to harbor criminals. There is a certain type of person that we do not invite into our lives. And James is saying to a Christian, there is certain attitudes in our hearts that have no business to be there.

And we should not harbor them. Rather, we should seek to get rid of them. And those are bitter envy and selfish ambition, self-promotion.

So that to be in church and to demand my rights, or to say, well, it's me first and my voice matters most, to push for importance that would serve to belittle others, is to deny the wisdom of the gospel.

It's to do exactly the opposite of what Jesus did. Because when Jesus lived, he both said and showed that we are to love our neighbor as ourself.

[15 : 30] We are to pursue the way of humble service, not the path of pride and self-promotion. So that wisdom is seen, it's seen in our humble good deeds.

Another question to help us measure wisdom is this. Where does your wisdom come from? So I was at talk on a Tuesday evening.

There was a church minister from Newcastle who was invited to come and speak to some church leaders. And he was one of those guys that had a slogan for every possible situation.

Some of them were very, very catchy and very helpful. He would talk about, for example, they wanted to be the church for the 95 and not for the 5. You know, church attendance, somewhere around 5%.

They wanted to gear their church to be accessible for outsiders. They talked about being a church of home groups, not a church with home groups. So for them, people meeting together to read the Bible, to pray was an essential part of their pastoral care.

[16:37] So it wasn't an optional extra. Church of home groups, not a church with home groups. And he had loads of these catchy slogans that are really helpful. And I imagine whether we actually write them down and articulate them, we probably operate with a certain set of guidelines, a certain sense that we have slogans that determine how we live and how we behave.

Whether that's at school or university, whether that's at work, whether that's in our family context. And so the question for us to be asking constantly is, where does my wisdom come from?

And especially if we're here today as Christians, are we checking to see that our slogans, our guidelines, match up with God's Word? Because James very helpfully, very strikingly, shows that there are two sources, two alternative wisdoms.

There is, in verse 15, the wisdom that comes down from heaven. Verse 17, the wisdom that comes from heaven.

Now that language of coming down from heaven has already been used in chapter 1, in verse 17, to say that every good gift we enjoy comes down from our Father in heaven. So there is this wisdom that comes down from heaven as a gift to us from God, but there's another wisdom.

[18:04] There's another wisdom. Verse 15, verse 16. There is a wisdom that does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual of the devil.

So these are mutually opposed. These are two very different ways to live. These are two very different voices to listen to.

And it's important for us to realize, even as we find ourselves in a church, even if we are Christians, that we hear the call of both. You know, like those cartoons with the angel and the devil on our shoulders.

We hear these alternative wisdoms, and they're vying for our attention, and we must consciously decide what wisdom we will follow.

And that's a decision that comes from our heart. We have a heart decision to make, a real wisdom call to make, and it's this. Who will I give glory to in my life today?

[19:10] Even more than just today, in this decision that I am facing, who will get glory? In this awkward situation that I'm having with my boss, my colleague, my family, who will I give glory to today?

The world's wisdom, as James puts it, the wisdom that comes from the devil, would have us give glory, bring glory, seek glory for ourselves.

We go all the way back to Genesis, Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve made in a perfect world, enjoying perfect relationships, made in the image of God with dignity and value.

What was that original temptation and sin in the Garden of Eden? You can be like God, to pursue glory for themselves outside of relationship with God.

And that temptation was still there in the first century, and it's still with us in the 21st century. So in the book of James, the temptation was to favor those who are wealthy because wealthy people would perhaps bring more benefit and more glory to an individual.

[20:24] The temptation to speak badly of others, to get ahead or for my voice to be number one, that was still there, to fight with others because of the desires that we have in our own hearts, the pursuit of glory that tends away from God and his ways.

To in effect rob God of his glory, to deny other people their dignity because we want to be central. And one of the things that's challenging for us is that we live in a culture where self-promotion is normal.

where sort of venting and having many opportunities to say what we want on any number of subjects is accessible and often seen as wise and natural.

There's very real temptations for us, and so we need the wisdom of the Bible to remind us there's another way, there's a better way because true wisdom comes from God and true wisdom will always seek to return glory to God, seeking to live to make his name great and not our own.

There's a very real difference in that, and there's a freedom in that. There's a freedom in the wisdom that receives the gospel, that receives Jesus as Lord and Savior, and in receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior, we have a relationship with our Father in heaven.

[22 : 01] We have peace with God. We're accepted. We're part of the family of God, and when we understand that and we live our days in that relationship, then we're given freedom that we don't need to be competing and comparing, which can be so crippling, so damaging, especially when we can see so many people's lives 24-7, people who are doing more exciting, more spectacular things than we are.

If we are loved and known and valued by God, that is enough and more than enough. The gospel gives us freedom to serve without seeking recognition.

Sometimes we can even serve so that we might receive glory. It's really, on a Friday morning, we have a toddler group, and it's always really nice to see the instinct of toddlers to want to help to tidy up.

You open the door, they know it's tidy up time. They've all been well trained, but there's always that really nice thing where after they've picked something up, maybe a rug, and they've taken it back over, they want to make sure, Mom, I'm helping the man.

We want recognition for the things that we do. But God's wisdom wants to give glory to God and to God alone.

[23 : 24] We think about the story we've been looking at in the Bible in the morning, in the book of Genesis, the story of Joseph. Joseph knew and loved God, and so even although his brothers had done terrible things to him, he was content to return good for the evil that he had received.

Wisdom seeks the best for others, isn't constantly fighting for our own glory. James has told us that wisdom is one of the good and perfect gifts that God provides.

Paul tells us that Jesus is the wisdom of God for us. So it stands to reason if we are Christian people that we need God's wisdom, and where is God's wisdom found?

It's found in his word. If we are to be wise people, we must be Bible people. That must be the standard we measure our wisdom by.

We must allow the wisdom of God to challenge and confront our own apparent wisdom, which often is folly.

[24 : 32] Third question for measuring wisdom. What difference does our wisdom make? I guess for many of us, when we have a choice to make, one of the things that we will do is we will weigh up the options.

You draw up your pros and cons list. You need a new car? You might be looking for boot space.

You might be looking for fuel consumption. You have your pros and cons. You want to move to a new city? You're looking for a new job.

You draw up your list. What difference will it make to my life to have or to not have the one over the other? And what James does for us is he tries to paint us a picture of the two outcomes for these two different types of wisdom, just as Psalm 1 did it.

We have a choice to make about the wisdom that we follow, and so he tries to follow that wisdom down the path to show where it leads, to help us to choose well.

So he shows us in verse 16, what is the impact of choosing worldly wisdom? For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

[25 : 59] When envy and jealousy, when pride and self-promotion dominate, it is almost inevitable that there will be division into tribes and factions and groups where people will be seeking to tear down rather than to build up, where people are looking to get ahead around looking good at all costs.

But then he shows us the flip side. He shows us what does worldly wisdom look like, and then he shows us the impact of godly wisdom.

Verse 17 and verse 18, particularly verse 18, peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

So rather than disorder, rather than evil practice, there's a harvest of righteousness. In two ways, first in our own lives, but then also there's an impact in the lives of others.

In verse 17 and 18, what difference does wisdom look like? It looks like a humble life that is committed to God. When it says the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, that means having a single-minded devotion to God, determined to follow God's way.

[27 : 20] It is peace-loving. Not living to criticize, not living to fight, not living to tear others down. It is considerate.

Wisdom is gentle. Wisdom is open to reason. Wisdom is submissive. It's willing to defer to others, recognizing not every hill is one to die on.

Wisdom from God is full of mercy and good fruit. And James has already spoken about that in chapter 2 in terms of being ready to love neighbors, being ready to serve others.

Wisdom from heaven is impartial. It doesn't show the kind of favoritism of chapter 2 where the rich are favored over the poor in order to try and win friends and gain favors.

Now, the wisdom that comes from heaven is sincere. It is genuine. It is honest. It is seeking the good of others.

[28 : 37] So there is a harvest of righteousness in our own lives when we follow God's wisdom, live in God's way. But that kind of life is also an attractive life.

And we are to live seeking to draw others towards Jesus in our words, in our actions. And so there's a harvest of righteousness in that way too.

So as we close, ask yourself the question, am I wise?

Am I wise in God's eyes? The decisions that I am making, where is my wisdom coming from? From God or from the world?

James has shown us that God's wisdom begins with humility, recognizing we need wisdom, we need help, we need Jesus to save us, we need the Spirit to change us, we need God's Word, the Bible, to direct us.

[29 : 43] That wisdom continues in good deeds, following in the footsteps of Jesus, with the help of the same Spirit that filled Jesus. That wisdom, that way of life, results in a fruitful life, when we are not just hearers of God's Word, but when we are also doers of God's Word, as we seek lives that impact others in a positive way.

James has drawn very sharp contrasts to help us to think, well, which wisdom seems best to us? which wisdom would I want to choose today?

Which wisdom, if applied, would be better in my house, in my church, in my community, in my country? Are we wise?

Let's pray. Let's pray.