

# Wisdom From Above

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray together, shall we? Father, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts and intentions of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight.

For you are our rock, our refuge and our redeemer. Amen. Please be seated. Amen. Well, if you would like to turn to James chapter 3, page 1012 that George just read for us, that's where we're going to be looking.

If you're new with us, we are about halfway through a series on the book of James. And I warn you, James is very bad for your personal equilibrium. It is not a book to make us feel good about ourselves, which is very tragic, really.

I don't know about you, but I find myself continually exposed and unmasked by the book of James. And if you feel a bit that way, you should try preaching it sometime.

It's very difficult. James just, he hates hypocrisy and sham. He lived that way for many years himself. And the book, what James, James is like an artist.

[ 1 : 20 ] And I'm told by people who paint, the first thing you do is you take a canvas and you stretch the canvas over a frame, over four pieces of a frame. And I want to try and give you this picture.

Aaron said this is far too complicated. But I said, no, no, mate, you're not thinking about the 11 o'clock congregation when you say that. But... Beware of flattery.

What James does, he stretches us out on the biggest possible cosmic canvas in four directions. So, I don't know if you're a visual person.

If you do, you can draw and doodle on this blank page at the back and you can mark out these four things. At the top is God the Father, who is the Father of lights, who gives every good gift from above.

From above. And we get this language through the book. So, today we're about wisdom from above. And we are tied to God the Father who lives above. But we are also tied, as we saw last week, our tongues are certainly tied to Satan himself.

[ 2 : 28 ] And when Satan wants to get amongst us in a Christian community, he loves to use our tongues. Remember that last week? How's it gone this week? It's tough.

Satan keeps reappearing, doesn't he, in this book. And we are connected also with Satan in some way, shape or form. On this side of the canvas is creation.

This world. A disordered world, not as God first created it, but we were made to be images and constantly there are images of creation. And on this side of the frame is the new creation, which is going to come about when Jesus the judge comes.

Or as James puts it, Jesus the judge who is now standing at the door. And we are stretched and connected to all of those four things. And I think that tension is the central tension in the book of James.

Because if you take one of those away, if you take your canvas off one of those pieces of frame, you get a distorted picture of yourself, of God, of the Christian life, of the world and of the church.

[ 3 : 40 ] But if we hold those four things together, at the center of the frame is the Christian community. The Christian community.

Living in this tension from top to bottom, between heaven and hell, between the first creation and the next. And it's the tensions that we live in that draw us to God's grace and draw us forward in wisdom.

And I think that's one of the reasons why the book is so practical and undoing, because it's truthful about these pools, not just for us as individuals, but as a Christian community.

This little section, chapter 3, verses 13 to 18, just five verses, has been something of a discovery to me this week. Just before the service, Aaron showed me a photograph on his iPhone.

Aaron, it is of a pregnancy test positive. Congratulations, Aaron. I was looking at the photo, thinking, what is this?

[ 4 : 46 ] A bit of white plastic. He didn't say anything about it. Then I suddenly realized what I was looking at. And suddenly the significance of what I'm looking at has to do with a family, it has to do with life, it has to do with another baby and more sleepless nights for Aaron and Amy, and on it goes.

And I'm afraid that I think we've been looking at James a little bit like that. We've been looking at the little white piece of plastic and trying to take it apart and understand it. But actually, there is a way of reading James that is far too individualistic.

And when we do that, we miss what is right in front of our eyes. It's so obvious, and it's so easy to miss this, that James is writing to Christian communities as communities.

He's not writing to us as individuals. The Christian church is the only group in this world that it feels this four-way pull to heaven, away from the pull of Satan.

Within this world, with all the complications that that means, toward the new creation. And it's so important for us to have these tensions in mind because before we came to faith in Jesus Christ, we just didn't feel them.

[ 6 : 07 ] But here's the thing, we don't just experience them as individuals, we experience them as a community. In every paragraph in James, every single paragraph is about how we live together with one another in community.

All the things that he's uncovered in our lives have to do with how we relate with each other. They're not about how you live in isolation. James is writing to churches to show the living reality of Christ in community, giving us a sense of the central place of the church plays in his purposes.

It's a great mistake to take this book and say, well, it's all about faith and works and living practically. Or it's all about living my authentic Christian life. No, it's about living our authentic Christian faith in community to be the kinds of communities that God proposes for us to be.

And I want to try and demonstrate this to you if I possibly can. So, how do you read a book? Well, you look at the beginning and the end, don't you?

Well, let's have a look at James that way. Stay with me for a moment. Go back to verse 1. Where does James start? Well, he starts by calling.

[ 7 : 22 ] He's writing to churches. And what does he call the churches? He calls them the fulfillment of all of God's purposes in the Old Testament. You see verse 1? To the 12 tribes in the dispersion.

In other words, all the privilege that God had invested in the people in the Old Testament to be the light to the nations now comes into the Christian church as we are heirs of the kingdom and God's plan for dealing with death and Satan and evil and sin and to restore the world to himself didn't stop in Jesus Christ but it now continues through Christian communities as communities.

Not just as collections or agglomerations of individuals who come and try and do well together but as bodies of brothers and sisters related to each other with the same Heavenly Father.

So, what's the one favourite way James has of referring to us as Christians? Eighteen times brothers and sisters brothers and sisters brothers and sisters and by the way it's a great thing to call each other brother and sister.

I know in some parts of the world when you call someone brother you're putting a bit of distance between them. Yes, brother or sister but actually a lovely Christian way for us to speak with each other.

[ 8 : 39 ] How does James end his book? Turn over to chapter 5. The last two verses my brothers and every reference to brother in James is gender neutral.

My brothers and sisters if anyone among you among you among you you see he's still talking about the community if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings them back let them know that whoever brings back a sinner from their wandering will save their soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

James here this is this is where the whole book has been leading to he's saying he's giving us the responsibility for one another he says watch for one another there may be someone in your midst who grows cool towards Jesus Christ the Lord of glory and he begins to fall in love with the world and he begins to live more as a friend of the world than a friend of God and gradually becomes too

busy for Christianity and for Christian priorities and to be engaged in the community. What does James say? You don't shame him and blame him and say I've nothing to do with him he doesn't say well just pray for him and make sure you keep growing he says bring them back that is the response the ultimate responsibility he is placing for one another in community to ensure that we continue and don't wander you have responsibility for others in this community this is where the book of James has been heading it's how we continue and grow to be the church of Jesus Christ in this very messy world go back to chapter 1 verse 17 look at the vast cosmic canvas again every good gift and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change and then he goes on to the x-axis of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures so what is it that binds us together?

because we're Vancouverites or like Anglicanism? no it's because we have a common father in heaven we are brothers and sisters and he has placed a new identity a new birth within us from above and God's purpose is that we together it's a corporate picture should be the first fruits of his creatures living in this creation taking our values and being a photograph a symbol of what life is like in the new creation it's not just our tongues that are cosmically connected to heaven heaven and earth and earth and hell it's we as a community and I think that's what's easy to miss it's easy to look at the look closely at the passages and miss the fact that he's talking to us as communities and I cannot tell you what an amazing privilege it is to belong to this Christian community I mean as a pastor I get to see people who are counting their sufferings and their trials as joys genuinely seeking the wisdom of God and living in humility closing their mouths and listening with their ears it is not it doesn't always happen like that those of you who've been in other churches

[12:07] I don't think I've ever told this story but my first annual general meeting after I left seminary I was sent to this church there was no rector there and the meeting the vestry meeting descended into a yelling match between the young female organist and the older male rector's warden and I thought they were going to hit each other and so I went and stood between and I put my hand on the chest of the rector's warden I didn't touch the organist they were screaming at each other and swearing at each other and yes it was very exciting but I'll tell you what it's just a disaster in church land well you see this is what James wants us to do he wants us to think not just about our behaviour but about how we are in the community let me give you one more illustration take partiality for example that we covered a few weeks ago since God has given us his own life and we call him father we are brothers and sisters and therefore all the social status and hierarchy markers that are so important to us in Vancouver they're just not the way we do things here partiality has no place not because it's distasteful or intrinsically evil but because we are part of the family of God and we stand exactly in the same relation to God's grace as the person next to us so as we come to chapter 3 in this little section today verses 13 to 15 we've got to have in our mind that this is a snapshot of a community and here's the key it's a snapshot of a community in transformation undergoing transformation and I want us to look as we come when we go through it to look at the inner dynamic of community transformation you see it is possible

I'll say it again to read this passage individualistically and if you do that you're either going to go away completely depressed or proud of yourself and if we read it individualistic we reduce it to a sort of moral lesson what we shouldn't do and what we should do so just have a look down there verse 14 what we shouldn't do whatever you do don't have bitter jealousy don't have selfish ambition verse 15 because it's earthly unspiritual and demonic and therefore very bad and we should all stop having bitter jealousy and selfish ambition and what should we do verse 17 here are eight things to work on and we could spend time there on the words and what they mean and the shades of Greek understanding and background but we'd miss the point why is it here see you could go through this and you could preach this and we'd all feel either very guilty or terribly full of ourselves but we'd be no further ahead really in terms of transformation would we we'd turn the riches the radical riches of James into a moral lesson we need to keep in mind as we look more closely that James is speaking to us as a church community see that's where he starts verse 13 who is wise in understanding among you among you it's in you literally it's the same in chapter 4 verse 1 what causes quarrels and what causes fights among you and we're going to come back to verse 13 in just a moment

I want us to see this is not just a contrast between two kinds of wisdom we don't we don't seek the wisdom of above because it's good and it's good to be good and be good and God will love you

James is drawing this contrast to show us two different kinds of community one kind of community that lives by the wisdom of the world and he's talking to Christians again a community that forgets the world to come that does only what's natural and in that sort of community there's a lot of room for Satan to work and the way Satan works is through our fractured relationships and what that does is it produces a community of disorder but there's a different kind of community and this is a community that tries constantly to live by the wisdom that comes from above that seeks in this world to live as first fruit of the new creation that does what is entirely impossible humbles itself before the face of almighty God draws on his wisdom and James says that produces a community marked by peace shalom so let's just look quickly at these two different kinds of community and what James says about them first the community of disorder verse 14 but if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts do not boast and be false to the truth this is not the wisdom that comes down from above but is earthly unspiritual demonic for where jealousy and selfish ambition exist there will be disorder and every literally the word is mean practice that's what it'll produce it'll produce disorder and the word means agitation self-division being restless it's the same it's from the same root as the word back in chapter 1 that speaks about the double-minded person the person who is half committed to God and half committed to the way of the world whose prayers for wisdom are half-hearted and who is surprised when their prayers are not answered and they don't seem to be growing they seem not to be growing patient at least it's also the same root back in chapter 3 verse 8 that we looked at last week where we saw the tongue is a restless evil tongues are never at peace with themselves tongue integrating the tongue into our life faith is very tricky a community a community of disorder is the opposite of a community of peace and peace in this passage is the bible peace it's wholeness and integration and health disorder we know it's the standard operating procedure of the world it's the standard operating procedure in politics in every country in the world it's the standard operating procedure in hell and James says it's just normal human wisdom but when it comes to the church it's awful and always close at hand and he says it breaks out when people pursue their own selfish concerns rather than thinking of the body our body thinking that the church is there to do what they want rather than thinking here is a place for me to serve Jesus Christ and James does it again he unmasks us he shows how it works and the basic engine behind this kind of disorder is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition and jealousy is a wonderfully creative and powerful invisible motivation jealousy is a kind of a sadness and a sorrow that we indulge in when someone else has something that I don't have and I point this direction not because Aaron's over there but I'm just giving this as an illustration and it's completely adaptable to every situation you can have financial jealousy you know someone's home or possessions or lifestyle but it can wrap itself around just about anything social status background education opportunity physical appearance spiritual gifts and we know we're indulging it when we become bitter it's exactly the same word used back in verse 11 remember does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and bitter water and there it was speaking about the tongue but here it is speaking about what's in our hearts and bitter jealousy

I think comes from the sense that God is just not good enough to trust in my circumstances so in the Christian community how it works is that I constantly compare myself horizontally to those around me and my attitude to those around me gradually changes from seeing the people from serving them and seeing people to serve but seeing how I can be served I shift from being involved to being a spectator and inevitably it's going to come out in bitter words either to the person or more usually about the person and it undermines community it's the same with selfish ambition it's the basic MO of the world I mean in this world we're encouraged to have selfish ambition aren't we you can't get anywhere without selfish ambition you've got to believe in yourself have faith in what you can do it's a self orientation which gauges things according to how they help my ambitions move forward and James simply says that's not the wisdom from above it's earthly it's unspiritual it's demonic it's just it's living in a box it's living it's taking the hinge off the top and the future it's living on a canvas that's loose and flappy as though this world and this life is all that there is it's allowing ourselves to be shaped more shaped by this culture than we are trying to shape the culture around about us by being a light and we all struggle with this all of us do all the time and you can see it very radically can't you in the temptation to

[ 22 : 05 ] Christian consumerism I don't you may not have heard of this you see it sometimes in church butterflies people who never stay long enough in one congregation to be committed or connected the irony about it is incredibly dissatisfying to the people who float around like that it creates community of disorder and Satan Satan really hates Christian communities where people

are living by the wisdom from above and he'll do anything to divide us by ambition and jealousy rather than having us be united by peace so I move quickly then to look at the description of the community of peace there is a different way and I think the reason James uses the whole language of wisdom is because this is the kind of wisdom that puts Jesus on the cross verse 17 the wisdom from above is stands out at the top of the verse first then three descriptions peaceable gentle open to reason then full of mercy and good fruits as the tongue was full of deadly poison this is full of mercy and good fruits and then impartial undivided and sincere but I think the purity is very interesting isn't it anything that's really valuable is pure water gold love and this wisdom that comes from above doesn't arise from in ourselves we can try as hard as we can to be as wise as we can we can get the wisest people on the planet we are not going to come up with this kind of wisdom it's God gift to us and it's God

God gives it to us through forgiveness and as he draws us near to him did you notice that every mark of this wisdom is community building it's all for the sake of others it's peaceable it's gentle it's open to reason it works for harmony it's amenable sweetly reasonable it's not combative not gullible it's not a pushover but it's listening and trusting and not going into attack mode and the result of this kind of wisdom is a different kind of community the opposite of disorder verse 18 a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make for peace this is a bit this is this is a bit round round a different way than we would usually say if we seek to live by the wisdom from above our lives will bear fruit in righteousness and James says when we live in community that way that righteousness is taken and planted in the soil of the community and it bears fruit in peace shalom peace not the absence of conflict but the positive well-being and it's very very attractive and there's no church on earth and there's no church throughout history who's entirely done it done away with jealousy and replaced it with sincere sincere wisdom you know what they say don't you don't find the perfect church because if you join the perfect church you'll ruin it this passage is important because it shows us a community in transformation and as we finish together what is the dynamic well it's in verse 13 who is wise and understanding among you by his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom there it is it's meekness it's humility there is no change in us there is no wisdom from above without humility and the thing about humility is that this is something we have to be actively engaged in otherwise these other things are not going to happen but the way humility works is indirect let me explain meekness and humility only come by living in the presence of one who is infinitely more glorious and infinitely more gracious than we are true Christian humility is not a personality trait that some of us were born with doesn't spontaneously grow by itself but it comes from living consciously in the presence of one who is vastly more powerful and vastly more wonderful and it comes as we draw near to God himself as we receive with meekness the implanted word then we work for peace it comes from seeing that we live in this tension between heaven and hell and this creation and the next creation and so that what we have to do is we have to take ourselves to God draw near to him to humble ourselves before him to live in his presence and he will exalt us because meekness isn't weakness it's strength under control and this is a very precious word for us as Christians in the Old

Testament you remember the promise of the Messiah was the king who would come who would judge the world and who would set all things right behold your king is coming Zechariah righteous and having salvation is he humble and mounted on a donkey on a colt on the foal of a donkey it's exactly this word the same word in James that Jesus uses to describe himself remember Matthew he says come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest I will give you shalom take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am meek that's the word gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light how did Jesus use his status what was his ambition he gave it away and he suffered patiently for us to create a family marked by meekness and I think of anything this is the key to ongoing community transformation and if you don't take away anything take this away we have to choose which story to be shaped by day by day are we going to be shaped by the story just of this world or are we going to be shaped by the story of Jesus

Christ our Savior and the choice happens in humbling ourselves and drawing near to God that's how we resist the devil and that's how God draws near to us it's in meekness that we receive the wisdom that comes from above the wisdom that comes from above to those who are meek is the sweet water of forgiveness that heals ongoingly the agitation it's his power it's his presence that purifies us and cleans us and leads us toward that wisdom and it's only in that meekness that truly

makes for peace and so let's continue to draw near to him to draw near to him as he draws near to us if we do a harvest of righteousness will be sown in peace by those who make for peace so let's continue to draw near to him right now as we kneel and pray together together so let's put aside this day give you a photo to follow tooro that the crew be and that the the the the the