

Thinking Christianly

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[0 : 00] by way of this is preface right now. I'm following the little preface. I want to do a longer introduction to today's talk, then a prayer, get to the important stuff of a prayer, and then a look at a passage from James today about wisdom.

I hope it's an appropriate passage to talk about as we end again a term, a learner's exchange. Specifically, we'll be looking in a few minutes from now at a passage from James, let's say, at chapter 3, verse 17, which goes up.

You know this verse. Some of you have it memorized, I'm sure. It's the kind of verse in the Bible that's worth memorizing. James says, The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere, and a harvest of righteousness, he says, is sown in peace by those who make peace.

What a lovely verse from the book of James. In a preface, especially perhaps today, again, as learner's exchange ends again for another season, especially in this kind of gathering, we might want to be reminded about what James says in the same chapter at verse 1.

This is a verse less likely to be memorized by Christians. James chapter 3, verse 1, just a part of it, he says, Not many of you should become teachers.

[1 : 42] Wow. Something to think about when you're standing up in front of people. A sobering word. James says there that the teacher will be judged with a greater strictness.

They have judgment. There's difference. There's different kinds, intensities of judgment. The teacher will be judged with... James is, of course, very famously...

We'll talk about this a bit today as we unfold this passage. He's very concerned with speech, isn't he? If you know the letter of James. With talking, which is the teacher's thing, of course.

That's what teachers do. So with that word in mind from James, I will try to be succinct, remembering that you don't want to risk too much by talking too much, especially in front of learned saints like yourselves who can contribute so much in discussion.

I look forward to that as we draw to a close in a while. So there's the end of a preface. This is moving right along. So by way of an introduction, this is again our final gathering for the season, and it might be a good time to think again.

[3 : 00] I hope, obviously, an appropriate time, I'll say boldly, to think again about Learner's Exchange and its purpose. Today's topic is obviously a suggestion to that end, I hope.

Thinking Christianly, if you saw the title outside or in the bulletin, thinking Christianly is obviously ridiculously ambitious.

It's presumptuous. However it is, you will know, it certainly appears to be a major New Testament theme, I would claim, thinking Christianly, have this mind in you, or among you it may be, or both, as Paul speaks to the church at Philippi.

Have this mind in you. It's important. Minds renewed is, as you know, envisioned for the church at Rome. The mind is to be set on things above, Paul says.

Is that the Colossians? These are just from memory at random. Paul says this so frequently. Adds a bit of content to the earlier statements. Have your mind set on things above, says the Apostle.

[4 : 17] The mind, of course, thinks. That's what minds are. They think. Or they reason. Or they ponder. An old philosopher from mid-century, just from memory, he defines, philosophers don't often do this, but he defines reason with blessed simplicity.

It's a hard thing to define the mind, formal terms. He says, Hans Jonas, we look within ourselves, don't we? And there we find this capacity to reflect upon the world.

It's amazing. It's a profound thing to be a human being. We have this capacity. There's something that it's like to be a human being, a philosopher says.

Blade of grass. There's nothing that it's like to be a blade of grass. Maybe a little something to be like a dog. Nothing that it's like to be a piano.

But there's something that it's like to be a human being. That's the mystery that God has made us. The mind is an amazing thing.

[5 : 26] We look within ourselves, and here's this capacity to reason. We just know that the mind reasons. It reflects. This little cluster of words about reasoning and reflecting goes to the heart of what it means to be a human being.

Maybe that's the key word. Heart. We are something. Yes, think about it in Christian terms. To have a mind, Paul says, set on things above.

A mind set on heaven. A mind which you will, if you will, I like language like this. Our minds may become a liturgy of gospel mysteries.

One of the reasons I love being an Anglican. I love the simple but gorgeous liturgy of Cranmer today in the prayer book. I want my mind to become that liturgy.

Oh, for a heart. Oh, for a mind. It says the hymn. Do you know that hymn that says, Oh, for a heart. I would say, Oh, for a mind. Resign, submissive meek, my great creator's throne.

[6 : 37] Oh, what the mind may be. It's amazing. However, this kind of talk may invite wrong expectations.

It may be very unguarded, that kind of talk. The kind of warning that is appropriate to hear in a ministry like Learner's Exchange.

It may appear, obviously, to promise too, too much. Here, I'm paraphrasing, I'm stealing, I'm paraphrasing from Oliver O'Donovan in a book he's just published about ethics.

New thought with the mind set on Christ, O'Donovan says, New thought replaces old. Grace overcomes mere nature.

A higher law overcomes a lower. And shortly, all becomes in the Christian life clear and unambiguous. Soon, in fact, there are no more compromises with this worldly morality.

[7 : 49] Mr. O'Donovan speaks ironically there. What happens, obviously, in Christian teaching and preaching is that what would be called formally an idealist morality hijacks, in fact, thinking in Christ.

What happens are, what happens, perfectionist expectations lurk in our midst and sooner or later they create confusion and incomprehension.

And I think very insightfully, Professor O'Donovan says, again, I'm paraphrasing, irony of ironies. This happens when the evangelical character of life in Christ, the evangelical character of having a mind in Christ is forgotten.

We live, we must always remember, and a ministry like Learner's Exchange, I think, helps us to keep this kind of balance alive in our minds and in our church teaching.

We live, we must always remember, in the age of discipleship. Learner's Exchange is about that, surely. We live in an age of anticipation. We live in the age of the church.

[9 : 15] We live in the age of the spirit. And then, again, I continue to paraphrase Oliver O'Donovan, who seems to me wisely, as he concludes these thoughts, this part of his book, by turning to the great Bishop of Hipple, St. Augustine.

This is the age in which, so says the Bishop of Hipple, quote, from the Bishop, our righteousness is in this life no more than forgiven sin.

That is brilliant. How thoughtful was St. Augustine about the things of the Gospel. Our righteousness in this world is that our sin has been forgiven.

It is to this real world, to people like ourselves, this world in which we live, to people like us, that redemption has drawn near.

We need a Savior, and he has come to us. I'll put Oliver O'Donovan aside for now. That was, I think, a very insightful, helpful comment from Oliver O'Donovan.

[10 : 32] Learners' Exchange, like any number of Christian venues, exists, surely, to keep this kind of proposed balance alive in our midst as a congregation.

Thinking Christianly calls us, of course, first things first. This is a thing about Learners' Exchange that I appreciate.

It reminds us of these things. We are called as Christians to practice what are sometimes called the intellectual virtues. There are virtues that attach to thinking, you know.

Obviously, these help, these intellectual virtues, in keeping gospel balance amongst us. Patience is an obvious intellectual virtue.

Practice patience as you inquire about the faith. Another intellectual virtue, a very important one, is breadth of inquiry. Learners' Exchange should be about breadth of inquiry in the gospel.

[11 : 42] Even in the study of the Bible, I'm sure you've noticed it sometimes in Bible studies and other venues, sometimes Christians do not practice what, again, is called a breadth of inquiry.

We don't look broadly at issues, seek out many different things that have been said about different issues. issues. We, inbuilt fixities and rigidities, says the great Thomas Torrance.

These keep us, he says, from hearing the Bible's witness. It's because we reach conclusions too swiftly as Christians at times. Stay away from what he calls inbuilt fixities and rigidities.

quote from Thomas Torrance, great Edinburgh theologian. Boasting about our own orthodoxy, he says, rather provocatively, he said this in lectures years ago, boasting about our own orthodoxy is no more permissible than boasting about our own righteousness.

We, Mr. Torrance, above, would tell you, of course, to love orthodoxy. It's the church's work at understanding the gospel. We should love it with all our hearts, but allow scripture to always search it out, to make it deeper, to not become a mere inbuilt fixity and a rigidity.

[13 : 11] There's a suppleness, a wisdom to the gospel. This, again, I think a ministry like Learners' Exchange may help us in.

It keeps us alive to different issues, different perspectives on different issues. So the mind in Christ, what a vision we have in the New Testament.

And in this life, our righteousness is, as the Bishop of Hippo says, forgiven sin. I have a mind in Christ. I'm to strive for this, but remember that my virtue is that my sin has been forgiven.

Somewhere between these great truths is a ministry like Learners' Exchange to keep us balanced in the gospel. Sometimes, not always, a pulpit has trouble creating balance, but a more leisurely, if I may call it, that ministry like Learners' Exchange can be a help here.

The Christian faith, of course, always lives in between these great extremes, or I prefer to call them intensities, great intensities. The Christian lives in a great exchange, does it she or he?

[14 : 29] Always righteous, says Luther, but always a sinner. Luther loved to talk that way, didn't he? One of my favorite prayers is from Luther.

Lord Jesus Christ, he says, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. What a contrast.

The Christian life is. John Dunn, in a poem addressed to Mary, talks about immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

I love the extremes of the Christian faith. The immensity of God becoming incarnate in a woman's womb. Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

Paul to the Galatians, one more. Remember he says, I'm in agony until Christ be formed in you. That was his goal for the Christian, to have Christ formed in you.

[15 : 33] This is from the man who said, I am the chief of sinners. He wanted Christ to be formed in him, and he knew himself the chief of sinners.

There is these two great intensities that form the Christian life. Christ being formed in me, and I am the chief of sinners.

And the New Testament, because we have so much to think about as Christians, to ponder, the New Testament proposes, it seems to me, how to put these things together.

It doesn't leave us merely staring at them in perplexity. It even proposes the New Testament how to put, if you will, properly understood, eschatologically understood, understood in anticipation, how to put all things together.

The way to do it, the way to do it, and this again is what Learner's Exchange is about, I trust, is to seek the way of wisdom.

[16 : 42] New Testament specifically, if you, I think, coming to think this more and more, sets apart, if that's the right term, wisdom as a specific Christian virtue, which is to be pursued.

It isn't the only part of the Christian life, but specifically wisdom. Is Learner's Exchange about, I take it is, it's about seeking the way of wisdom.

It must be in some measure about seeking wisdom. wisdom. Wisdom. Just before we turn to James in a moment.

Wisdom is about, here's my own tentative definition of wisdom. I don't think there's just one definition of wisdom. Wisdom is about discerning, if you will, authority, and granting authority its appropriate influence in our lives.

wisdom. In the discussion time, I'd like to hear your definitions, your thoughts about wisdom. But there's a tentative proposed definition of wisdom.

[17 : 51] To pursue wisdom is to pursue the discerning of authority and to grant that authority its appropriate influence in our acting real, concrete lives.

All authority comes from God, Paul told the Roman Church. All authority comes from God. The supreme authority is God, and this supremacy grants or establishes lesser authorities in the creation to participate in the rule of the creation.

To sit on sapphire thrones and wield their little tridents. It's a great little line from one of Milton's poems.

Perfectly captures why God created human beings, I think. He created us to sit on little thrones and to wield our own little authority appropriately as creatures in his image, in his creation.

That's why God created human beings. Learner's Exchange gazes, if you will, at these authorities. along our whole program over the years.

[19 : 15] There are authorities in the world which aren't often recognized as authorities, but indeed they are. For instance, music is an authority in the world.

Right now in our culture, it has a lot of authority, music. Architecture has authority. Poetry has authority. In my own life, poetry has met a lot.

God sometimes gives you a love of a particular art, and it has a shaping influence in your life. Music, architecture, poetry, the discipline of scholarship which generates the good study of scripture and good study of history.

An involved biblical knowledge. Remember last week, David Robinson, didn't he give us an example of what an involved, complex study of scripture gets to?

I thought that was good last week. We saw the authority of godly scholarship and how it helps us to penetrate into the mystery of scripture.

[20 : 21] God wants that authority at work in his church. Discerning wisdom, to discern wisdom is needed, a discerning wisdom is needed because the authorities, the New Testament tells us, have become unruly, haven't they?

Unruly and therefore creating deep, confusing complexity in this strange and mesmerizing world. Learners of Change sometimes looks at difficult issues.

It has to. My favorite example of this, just an example of how the New Testament recognizes the complexity of authority issues.

Matthew's gospel reports that Jesus told his disciples on one occasion to roughly, I'm paraphrasing here obviously, you can ignore our Lord told his disciples, ignore the examples that the Pharisees give you, but you are to obey their teaching, he says, because they inherit the seed of Moses.

It's a very interesting moment in Matthew's gospel. Public teaching authorities here receive our Lord's measured respect.

[21 : 45] act. Isn't that interesting? That the Lord recognizes the authority of the Pharisees to teach, even though he's deeply critical of them. Now there's complexity.

There's an authority, Jesus says, but discern in wisdom the nature of its authority and beware of it at the same time. Teaching authorities, which you're supposed to respect, may have offices occupied by people who are anything but admirable.

And our Lord recognizes that. It's part of the mystery of what you have to do as a Christian. Public teaching authorities receive our Lord's respect.

So, the issue of wisdom, it is through wisdom, in wisdom, that our God created the world. The creation is saturated, I think this is a safe generalization, with God's wisdom.

Proverbs 8 is a classic passage to look at in that regard. It is through the world that our God would approach us and speak to us.

[23 : 00] And that world that God has given us to live in is saturated with his wisdom. These are big topics I know just to touch on. The world as it was created, I've learned this from Thomas Torrance, over the years, thought about his teaching.

The world is to be understood by the Christian as, if you will, a great objectivity and a great intelligibility.

That's what God has given us to live in. That is the doctrine of creation in a nutshell for the Christian. The world is really there.

God has to be there. It's not a projection of human knowledge. It's really there to know. And it's intelligible. And as such, it is a good place for humanity and God to know one another in fellowship.

You can say, isn't that obvious? No, it's not obvious. A lot of religion, it creeps into our tradition sometimes, is, here I am, I want to get saved and go elsewhere.

[24 : 10] The elsewhere is usually called heaven. This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through. Bad hymn, bad lyrics. No, God created this world for us to know and love.

It's an objectivity, it's an intelligibility, and this is where God meets with us. A doctrine of creation is really important for the Christian to know.

heaven gives us, you see, a kind of mediated knowledge. The Lord gives us this mediated knowledge of himself. Hence, you have ministries in the church like Learner's Exchange to look at all this mediated knowledge, all these interim authorities that God creates, that we're to discern and know.

As we will now see, our God will approach us through these lesser authorities and through his creation gently.

Our God is a good creator. Our creator, we're going to see, is nothing less than open to reason. He loves reason, our God.

[25 : 20] He created a real, beautiful creation filled with intelligibility. It's knowable. He expects us to know it and to delight in it.

He created it not just to be there, but to be filled with his wisdom. What a wonderful thing it is to know these things. To unpack this, we of course need a little bit of help, to put it mildly.

So I'm suggesting that today we spend some time with listening to no less a person than a brother of Jesus of Nazareth named James.

There's an older critical tradition that poo-poops that this was written by our Lord's brother. It's wrong. The better, the better scholarship can show you strongly the letter of James was written by the man, a man who grew up with Jesus.

He knew him. This is a brother of Jesus that we're going to talk with, a son of Mary. think about it.

[26 : 27] I just want to, I feel the sense of the mystery of this letter. It adds to it when I think about this. When I read James, James knew Jesus that way.

A great leader in the early church. So, end of introduction. That was a long introduction. Now, I want to say a prayer. I want to say a prayer. See, learning that James is ordered and structured.

It's a great objectivity. It moves along in an ordered way. Preface done, intro done, prayer. Then, to the heart of things. Allow me to lead us in prayer.

Let's turn to our Lord and here, ask him to lead us today. Lord, do teach us this morning. Be our teacher, Lord.

Teach us about wisdom this morning and give it to us as we intend to grow in wisdom by your grace, Lord. Lead us, indeed, to a deeply intelligent adoration of you.

[27 : 35] Because you are a deeply intelligent one. You expect us to know you in wisdom. Help us, Lord, in these things. You are our creator and you are our redeemer.

Amen. Amen. James is quite, as you know, most of you, I know, over time in Bible studies and in your own study, you know that James is quite interested in wisdom.

Early in his wondrous little epistle, it probably, by the way, should be thought of specifically as a homily. This is somebody recording James preaching on different occasions, probably.

James says right off the bat in his little lovely epistle, if any of you, there's almost a touch of irony in this, if any of you, he says, lack wisdom, if that was possible in a Christian gathering.

Learn as it's changed. Why do you come? You know where people. If any of you lack wisdom, well, he says, this seems so obvious, but whenever you come across something obvious in scripture, I think you should sit down and say to yourself, it's probably not obvious.

[28 : 51] He says, if you lack wisdom, ask for it. Be like a child and go to your father and say, I need something. Ask for it. I agree with Ben Witherington, a wondrous, speaking of wonderful, wonderful biblical scholar.

If you need some help in reading the New Testament, you want some help from a pro, a guy who gets paid for teaching New Testament studies, I would recommend Ben Witherington. He's just wonderful.

I agree with that learned gentleman that James here speaks about very particular concrete real life dilemmas. James is saying, if you've got problems in your life, a long life's way you always will, go to the Lord and ask for his wisdom about specific details in your life that you want to address by heaven.

because the Lord wants to talk to you about your real life dilemmas. Do it, James says. Studying the word and immersing yourself is absolutely important, but Witherington reads James as saying, never in contradiction to that, but the Lord wants to speak to you about your real life, your marriage, your friendships, your finances, your whatever, your health, whatever you're struggling with and you're aware of it, go to the Lord and ask him for wisdom about specific things.

The Lord's brother says we should do that. Along life's way, the God from whom comes every good and every perfect gift, as James says, with whom there is no shadow due to change, echoing Genesis for sure there.

[30 : 35] A little hint, it seems to me, that Genesis was read by Jews as wisdom literature. This God, who never tempts to evil, you recall, James says in his first chapter as well, this God sends or allows perplexity.

And to address perplexity, we are to ask for wisdom. James emphasizes this throughout the whole chapter, even though he doesn't tell you that. He's asking you to think through with him these issues.

God allows these perplexities so that you'll go to him and ask for wisdom about them. They're not just random accidents. Ask God for wisdom. If any of you lack wisdom, ask.

So James tells us. It is good to note that the homily of this little homily of James, to put it mildly, is redolent of the Sermon on the Mount.

It's filled with the Sermon on the Mount, James Epistle. James has absorbed his brother's teaching. Ask, it will be given to you, taught Jesus, James' brother.

[31 : 49] Ask, it will be given to you. It's a bold promise and we're to boldly take hold of it. Likewise, James, ask.

Our God wants to answer. Here is a wisdom, by the way, you can't help but notice, which is strongly, if you will, counter. There is nothing obvious about this teaching.

It's not easy. Our world strongly doubts that we have real access to a divine order. And I think it seeps into the minds of we Christians.

We think of it as very other, the next world. I'll get to heaven. This world is not my home. I'm just passing through. Let me out of here, Lord. No.

This creation is redolent of God's wisdom and he means us to draw upon the wisdom of heaven to deal with life in this world. We do have access to an invisible divine order and we're to ask for it.

- [32 : 55] It's wisdom. Ask for it. It's strongly counter but we're to take hold of that and believe it strongly. The gospel, it seems to me, challenges this doubt by a witness, if you will, to the strangeness of divine wisdom.

Immensity in thy dear womb. There is a strangeness to the way God approaches the world. There is a strangeness to the way God speaks his wisdom into our lives and we're to be aware of this.

James talks about this in his little, in his preaching. The divine wisdom, do you recall James' epistle? It likes to turn things upside down. It's very surprising.

If you're a lowly one this morning, well James says, if I were you, I'd exalt in your high status in Christ. Yes. Let the lowly brother, let the lowly sister exalt in their exaltation.

You have the mind of Christ. Salvation is yours. Christ is being formed in you. Are you comfortable today? Are you rich in many different ways? Life's good? Well, here's wisdom, James says.

- [34 : 10] If I were you, I would rejoice in your humiliation. You're rich and you're just fading away, aren't you? Wealth in this world is rarely of any real lasting value.

God likes to, James teaches this, do role reversals. He likes taking rich people and making them poor. He likes taking poor people and making them rich.

God's wisdom is strange in the world. It takes discernment. Wherever in the world did James get such strange ideas? He may have remembered that someone he knew really well said the first, they'll be last.

The last, they'll be first. told the Pharisees once that the prostitutes are going into heaven and you're not. You have the teaching authority of Moses, I'll honor that, but you're going to hell, by the way.

Oh, this world is complex, isn't it? To discern wisdom in the gospel is surprising. James makes us see that again.

- [35 : 17] James wants his hearers to consider the divine wisdom. In his preaching, he must have emphasized this time and again. And to that end, he puts in front of us a famous description, which you and I are, of course, are familiar with.

I'm really good at technology. This is about my limit.

Ah, there it is. Ah, that was hard. Yeah.

He begins, I'm going to jump right into this, it's getting on in time. James, you recall, we read it earlier, James begins by telling us where wisdom comes from.

He says the wisdom that he wants to talk to you about, is, wants to talk to us about today, is from above. This is not any ordinary wisdom. The wisdom is from above that he wants to talk about.

- [36 : 25] This cannot be demonstrated, but I would like to think that here James is indirectly referring to his brother. The wisdom from above, he says.

3.17. I think he's thinking about his brother. Paul and James knew each other quite well, and Paul, we remember, loved to say things like, set your mind, we've heard them earlier, set your mind on things above.

Above is, of course, a metaphor of authority. Above. That means authority. set your minds on things which are above, says Paul, where Christ is seated.

We might then ponder this wisdom description as a remembering of Jesus. I think it's safe to do that, surely. The one who preached the immensity of the, the imminence, excuse me, of the kingdom, a kingdom where God rules, he taught, blessed are the pure in spirit, for they shall see God.

And James then first remembers this, that the wisdom from above is pure. First thing to know about wisdom, James wants us to remember this this morning, is that wisdom from above is pure, has an effect in the world, and that effect in the world is purity.

[37 : 51] It is untouched by the world's corruption. James likes to use a word like unstained from the world. True religion means you visit orphans and widows, and true religion keeps you unstained from the world, James says.

It is set apart, it is different. James thinks, doesn't he, in his epistle, that the way to measure character is to listen to your speech.

some speech is, he says famously, I hope you're familiar with his epistle, I'll remind you of it, I know you've read it.

Some speech, he says, is set on fire by hell, he famously says. What a pungent expression. It brings about 30 specific words in James' epistle, maybe more than that, maybe 60, that are not used anywhere else in the New Testament.

James says, with speech we bless and with speech we curse, and this should not be so, he says. With speech we bless and with speech we curse, this should not be so, says this wisdom writer.

[39 : 08] I am a man of unclean lips, said Isaiah, when he saw Israel's God. At Pentecost, it's interesting to note this.

At Pentecost, tongues were set on fire by heaven. That's interesting. James was there, you know, at Pentecost.

He was there with his mother Mary. Purity, one measure of it, is revealed in our speech. Pure speech will order your life and other people's lives and will build you up.

Wisdom from above is first pure. You could spend a lot of time on that. Then he says the wisdom from above is peaceable. That might be a surprise. Do you find that a bit of a surprise?

I do. If wisdom is pure, wisdom might be fierce. And it is in some Christians. It might be unyielding.

[40 : 14] It might be intimidating. Sometimes purity does that to us. Sometimes purity intimidates us. Another James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee, you might recall, were nicknamed by Jesus sons of thunder.

It's not too encouraging. Perhaps they were enthusiastic. Perhaps they were fiery. Perhaps they were deeply committed. All of which is to the good, for sure.

But maybe they were merely fierce at times. Maybe they were quite prone to anger. Oh, they were, you know. Lord, somebody ignored our Lord's teaching on one occasion, remember, and their suggestion was, Lord, shall we call down fire from heaven?

There's a solution, Lord. There you go, a kind of Christians with a drones ministry. Boom! Got them! What do you think, Lord? Wow.

Sons of thunder. You meet them in the church all the time, especially in conservative circles. They need to learn about the God of peace. The wisdom from above is peaceable.

[41 : 30] Wisdom, says James, is peaceable. We'll move right along, because there's a deep family resemblance. He says that wisdom from above is gentle. He'd heard from his brother, you know, the meek, this is total counter wisdom to our culture.

The meek will inherit the earth, said Jesus. The world doesn't believe that. It's hard to believe that. But the meek are going to inherit the earth.

A gentle person is not afraid of the world's fierceness. The world is a fierce place, you know, and it's not wise in that fierceness.

Christians can, on the whole, just put aside fierceness. Gentle persons in Christ, gentle persons with the mind of Christ will be as wise as serpents about the world and its ways.

But they will learn that the wisdom of gentleness is much better than the world's way. gentleness is a work for the completely serious disciple.

[42 : 45] It was very helped by Ian Proven recently, a couple months ago, he gave a lecture at Regent about the Tea Party movement. He talked about Cain and Abel in that lecture. Cain, you know, murdered his brother, the Bible's first murder, the opposite, obviously, of gentleness.

What does the God of Israel, the learned one, Ian Proven, I love that man, he says, what does the God of Israel do here? Well, two things.

First off, he judges Cain, and then he does something else. He protects Cain from man's fierce justice.

God does not like man's fierce justice. He protects humans from that. It's scary what is done in the name of human justice.

God's intention, and this is, see the narrative of scripture always, God's intention is to save the world, not to judge it in fierceness.

[43 : 53] No. God wants to save the world. The God of Israel reasons, we're going to see. The God of Israel likes to teach. He calls out to His people in love.

Wrath, as John used to like to say, wrath is God's strange word. God doesn't like wrath. In us, it's useless. The wrath of man does not bring about the life that God desires.

The moments of great wrath in scripture are exceptional, and they do not indicate God's character at all. So said Ian Proven a couple months ago. The wisdom from above is gentle.

God wants gentleness to triumph in the world, not fierceness. No. The anger of man does not bring about the kind of life that God desires. The wisdom from above is gentle.

Briefly, wisdom is open to reason. Yes, of course, the pure and the peaceable and the gentle, of course, if you will, they desire reason.

[45 : 00] At Learner's Exchange, surely this is one of our themes. How beautiful is the gift of reason. Let us never turn our back on it. Our humanity is reason, if you will.

Let us make man in our image, says Genesis. Was it directly by fiat, perhaps, that God created man? Or did he take eons of time, commanding a cosmos and an earth to bring forth the mystery of a reasoning, knowing, praising humanity, capable of knowing God, capable of reason.

God means us to grow in reason, the church to grow in reason. Never are we afraid of reason. It is a gift from God. Open to reason is the wisdom from above.

Again, swiftly, full of mercy and good fruits, says James next. It is impartial and sincere. Full of mercy.

What words those are? They're worth pondering. I remember reading in my misspent youth way too much philosophy, especially a guy named Walter Kaufman, now a late professor of philosophy at Princeton, very learned, hyper-sophisticated, learned man, translator of Nietzsche, a Nietzschean himself.

[46 : 30] He just despised religion in general and Christianity in particular. He once said that when he read that Jesus said from the cross, Father, forgive them, he said that brought him to silence.

He was moved by that. Our Lord's mercy will break hearts. even this brilliant, hard, tough-minded Nietzschean philosopher said that brought me to silence when I first heard that.

Can we ever say too much to another? Our Lord was full of mercy. It wasn't episodic, now and again, I think I'll be merciful now.

No, he was full of mercy. The wisdom from above. I am certain James is remembering his brother. Oh, he was full of mercy.

Full of mercy. It's powerful mercy. And a harvest of righteousness, it's not up here at all, is sown in peace by those who make peace.

[47 : 41] James ends this little passage on wisdom. There's other stuff, if you will, in his lovely homily, the book of James, about wisdom.

Look through the book of James sometime, just study what he says about wisdom. It's wonderful. The church's first great battle was over, as you know, circumcision.

A huge church unity threatening battle. The very, very first believers, of course, were all Jews, as we know.

they worshipped in the temple, the book of Acts reminds us. They witnessed that the Messiah had come and had risen from the dead. Everything remembered about Jesus, his actions and his teaching, would have been understood within the matrix of their intense Jewishness.

James was intensely Jewish, if you will. James was the leader, the profound and wise leader of the church in Jerusalem and he led its witness to Israel.

[48 : 50] So what happens, this story is so well known, I know, what happens when Gentiles respond to the gospel? Let's get the impression in the book of Acts that they were a bit surprised. Oh no, Gentiles are believing in the Lord.

What a mix up. Those folks, you know, what are you going to do? We need some wisdom here. What happens when the Gentiles respond to the gospel?

What about our food laws that give us our identity? These were precious, important things to really pious Jews. They would have been practiced in the household of Jesus with James.

Mary and Joseph would have practiced these laws. They were precious to Israel. Some people died in Israel rather than give up things like food laws.

What about Sabbath observance? Very precious to them. All the distinctives which made Israel, Israel. And Jesus, Tom Wright loves to make this point. It's worth knowing. I'm sure you've heard it before.

[49 : 54] Jesus never addressed the issue of circumcision. Really? Nothing clear there. And again, as Professor Wright rather provocatively says to his colleagues in the New Testament business who don't agree with his approach, here was a chance to make up a Jesus word to solve it.

Oh yeah, the Lord once said, if you ever meet a Gentile, don't insist that he get circumcised. He never said anything like that. They didn't make up a word about Jesus because they weren't in the habit of ever doing that.

The early church didn't make up teachings of Jesus. There are Christians around who have these ideas. No. The church's unity was at stake here. What are we going to do with these unclean Gentiles who are now saying that Jesus is Lord?

And to put it simply, James, the Lord's brother, sowed peace and brought about a harvest of righteousness. Famously, as you know, in the book of Acts.

Paul probably would have stopped his ministry to Gentiles if James had ever said to him, stop. Apparently, James had that much authority in the early church.

[51 : 10] James was a towering figure. He was known for his holiness and his wisdom. James realized that the spirit was calling Gentiles like us here today into the church.

As surprising as that was to him, he blessed the ministry of Paul and Jew and Gentile were welcomed into the body of Christ.

He probably led a very good pharisaic minded community of Jewish Christians into a kind of rich ministry and it was a long defeat for them, but it was a faithful ministry in the gospel.

Some Jews probably just couldn't give up their Jewish distinctives even as they truly knew the Lord and worshipped him in truth. James was the leader of marvelous Christian brothers and sisters like that in the early church.

James must have been a wonderful fellow. I think he knew lots about wisdom. He practiced it. He brought about great peace for the first generation of Christians through his wise discernment on our behalf that God was reaching out to Gentiles and bringing them into the mystery of Israel.

[52 : 39] What a man James must have been. Wisdom from above he tells us is pure and peaceable and gentle and open to reason, full of mercy, brings about great things, good fruits.

It's impartial and sincere. It's pure like our Lord was pure. Our Lord related to so many different kinds of people.

His loveliness of character must have been so appealing. Learner's exchange exists to bring about a love of and by God's grace a practice of wisdom in the gospel.

Yes, they have the mind of Christ, but we're sinners. How can we bridge these things? Wisdom. Bridges them. Wisdom bridges Jew and Gentile.

Paul famously says it will bridge male and female. It will bridge the sophisticated and the unsophisticated. Churches should be rich mosaics of all sorts of different kinds of people.

[53 : 45] The wisdom from above will bring this about in the body of Christ. Amazing stuff. The wisdom from above. Just a post-script before I end.

We can have 15 or 20 minutes or so for conversation. That not many should become teachers comment from James. I'll come back to that to close it off.

James, it seems to me, would want his hearers to think through always what he says. That's what a wisdom writer did. He put ideas in front of you and said, let's discuss.

Let's pull this wisdom out of this. Let's get balanced. Let's see what is here. Let's think through this issue. It is not meant to discourage folks speaking at learners exchange.

It's not a prophetic word from the past. Christians should teach. I'm sure James means that. He was at Pentecost when everyone became a teacher, if you will, with the fiery tongues from heaven.

[54 : 49] But it is a warning, isn't it? It's a blunt reminder that our speech needs to become properly understood. This is an obvious thing. It's social always.

Unless you have a bad habit of talking to yourself all the time. Speech is social. It changes people. It goes out into the world.

It shapes people. Speech is powerful. It may bless, as James says, or it may not. Be very careful, James says.

It's a great teaching device I found. Try and go through 24 hours just measuring your speech. I have been appalled by it. How often it's casual, unthoughtful, maybe doing harm I'm not aware of, motivated wrongly.

The speech almost is like a mirror that immediately says, now why would you say that? Why that? Why not something else? Why not a patient word rather than a harsh word?

[55 : 58] Watch your speech. So, speech is powerful. We're to just be aware of it. So, I think James is being wonderfully rhetorical there. Not many become teachers.

Don't be foolish. Teaching is like speech all the time. It should be godly. Let your speech be wise in the gospel.

Let your speech be, how about words like this? Pure and peaceable and gentle and obviously open to reason. And may it realize the Lord's wild one hundred fold harvest in the world.

She promised his word would do. Mark's gospel, you know, chapter four, is it? words planted appropriately will have a harvest. As James says, James always remembers Jesus.

A harvest that you can hardly believe it's so good. If your speech becomes holy, you'll change the world, James is saying, I think. If we would just produce one generation of Christians with holy speech, set on fire by heaven, we would change the world.

[57 : 09] It's almost as if James said, do it! it will end up either set on fire by hell, or you'll have a tongue set on fire by heaven.

James could almost, I was there once when it happened. You wouldn't believe the fruit that came of that. Three thousand one day. So James wants the church to know wisdom.

And Learner's Exchange wants the church to, again, at a more leisurely pace. See what wisdom has built into the creation. Music and architecture and poetry and all the beautiful things that may adorn the church and the gospel.

Because God wants us to love these things and to claim them for the gospel. The wisdom from above is wonderful. That's what I wanted to share with you today.

I've gone on longer than I should have. Let me say a closing word of prayer and then time for discussion. Lord, thank you for Learner's Exchange, for all that it means to us.

[58 : 15] May it continue teaching us the wisdom of the gospel, the power of this wonderful gift you've given to us that will change us in every way, will search us out.

Lord, we ask almost in incomprehension how you could make us wise, but we claim your promise that you will make us wise, wise unto salvation.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.