

The End of Hypocrisy

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, even before I graduated to the seniors-only scooter that I'm currently using as a mode of transport, old age had begun to encroach on me.
- I turned 33 just a few weeks ago, but even before that, friends were very quick to point out the few silver sprouts that had begun to appear in my hair.
- I tried to embrace it, tried to spin it positively. I even had a 30th birthday party that was themed Silver Fox, because I figured maybe there's an upside to the silver.
- Maybe it's wisdom. I figured it could be beneficial for my ministry to young people. Now when I talk to parents of teenagers who are clearly older than me and have more experience, I figure I can just point to my wisdom streaks, and perhaps they might buy that I know what I'm talking about.
- I mean, I've got a bit to go before I have the crowns of a Mike Kasson or a Ken Taylor, but I can only hope. I can only hope. But with that silver hair does go this perceived wisdom that I've tried to embrace.
- [1 : 1 1] And with actual wisdom, thank you, Mike, for you perhaps. But with that silver hair, with things like that, there is a perceived wisdom and perceived authority that often goes with maybe physical traits or life experiences.
- But the question we need to wrestle with this morning is, who is actually wise? That's James' question as he begins this passage, as he writes this letter to a whole group of churches scattered.
- He begins with, who is wise and understanding among you? It's a really significant question for the churches that he's writing to, because these churches have division and disunity and issues all throughout them because some people are claiming to be wise, claiming to speak with authority and wisdom who actually lack it.
- And the result is disunity, oppression, everything that's come up in the first part of this letter, the need to stop showing favoritism, the need to use their tongues more carefully, the need to listen to God's word and do what it says, the need to endure suffering, are rebukes.
- Because people who claim to be wise have been teaching something else. So, who is wise?
- [2 : 3 9] Who is it that we should listen to? What does it look like for us to be wise, to live the life that God desires for us and has designed for us?
- Do we look to the educated? Are they wise? Do letters after someone's name constitute that they are someone to be emulated when it comes to following Jesus? Or perhaps the silver crown does experience a life lived?
- What about the wealthy? The successful when it comes to things like business? Who is wise? Wisdom is a significant claim and James calls out those who put it out falsely.

Verse 13. Who is wise and understanding? Let him show it. Prove it is the call straight away. It's like those late night infomercials that you watch that apparently are made from the same thing as the space shuttle and can clean your house, cook your dinner, park your car and do your shopping and all will cost you only \$9.99 a month.

And immediately there's this bid in you that says prove it. I don't believe the ad version. It could be TV magic. Big claims need proof. And so James says to anyone who would stand and claim wisdom, prove it.

[4 : 04] Let them show it by the good life, by the deeds that are done in the humility that comes from wisdom. Because wisdom is more than just knowledge.

We live in a time where knowledge is rapidly increasing. Our world knows more than it has ever known. I heard a statistic just this week that apparently 90% of the information that currently exists in the world didn't exist two years ago.

Our knowledge is advancing rapidly. But it hasn't reduced the number of wars, the level of suffering, the amount of evil.

Wisdom needs to be more than knowledge. Wisdom has to be practical. James says show us your wisdom in the way that you live.

Show us the good life that you are enjoying. Show us the evidence of this wisdom that you hold. Wisdom needs to be practical. But it's important, especially for us as Christians, to recognise that wisdom isn't always as specific as maybe we want it to be.

[5 : 21] Have you ever been in that situation where maybe you're trying to decide this job or that job? This potential spouse or that potential spouse? This country or that country? And so you ask God, show me.

Give me wisdom in this situation. Strike one of the countries with a lightning bolt to tell me. But that's not how God's wisdom works. Wisdom in the Bible isn't the specific directions for every circumstance and situation that we may face.

Wisdom is the ability to make the choices that please God regardless of situation or circumstance. It's something that stands outside of the specifics that come up in life but then equips us to make those choices and to make those decisions well.

But in the church there is a false wisdom that gets lived out by many people who claim to be godly. It's true in the churches that James is writing to and it's true for us here at St. Paul's.

It's true for many churches today. Because remember this letter is written to the church. It's written to Christians. And yet James sees wisdom as an absolutely central issue for them to grapple with.

[6 : 42] Have a look at verse 14. At this false wisdom. Now, before we go on, it's really easy to look at that and go, of course that's bad wisdom.

I mean, it's got adjectives like selfish and bitter. Not to mention it's called demonic. You read that and go, of course that's not the kind of wisdom that I want.

That's not the kind of wisdom that I live with. But let's just strip out some of those adjectives for a second. Ambition. That's something that is affirmed culturally, isn't it?

We're told to pursue our ambition. We're told that we can do whatever we want. Isn't it important to always look after number one?

I don't know if you remember what it was like to be heading towards the end of school and meeting with a careers advisor. I remember because I really had no idea what I was going to do.

[8 : 00] And the caring advice of my careers advisor was, do something that makes you happy. It was genuinely loving advice.

He was looking out for me. But it was all about me. His caring advice to me was, look after yourself. Find a job that satisfies you and makes you happy.

No reference to anyone else. No reference to the world that I lived in or the relationships that I had. Look after yourself. You see it in the way that we treat situations in the world.

Currently, I was watching the project on Channel 10 recently and they had some character. I think he was a car, former car racer or something like that. And they were asking him about the Syrian refugee crisis.

And I was blown away by his response. His parents were refugees. But he said, I have two little girls who were born here and we need to worry about them before we worry about anyone else.

[9 : 00] But on one level, that makes sense, doesn't it? It makes sense to worry about yourself.

That's the way the world works. Look after yourself. It's the way we naturally respond in situations. When you're frustrated in traffic, why are you frustrated?

Because someone is hindering you. And where you want to be. And your desire. And your agenda. It's on one level, logical.

To start with yourself at the centre. It's considered virtuous even. To pursue your agenda above all others. But it just doesn't work.

That's why it's false wisdom. That's why James can call it earthly and unspiritual and even demonic. Those are harsh words. But they're the Bible's words.

[10 : 04] When we live. When we make decisions based on a worldview, based on a perspective, where we're the centre. Where we're the most important thing.

That is earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom. It doesn't work because self-interest breeds issues.

There's this underlying kind of narrative in society that thinks that everybody should be able to do what they want to do. You can believe whatever you want as long as it doesn't hurt me.

But life doesn't work like that. If you believe what you want and I believe what I want. If you go after what you want and I go after what I want. At some point we're going to be competing for the same thing. At some point we're going to come into conflict about the fact that our desires don't line up.

Because what's best for me won't always be best for you. And what's best for you won't always be best for the person next to you. Or the people you live with. Or the people you work with. Or the people you're sharing the road with. And so when we are dictated by self-interest.

[11 : 11] No matter how logical or obvious or first reactionary it is. It breeds disorder. Verse 16. Where you have envy and selfish ambition.

There you find disorder and every evil practice. You find tension. You find relational issue. You find anger. You find bitterness.

You find gossip. You find slander. You find favoritism. You find all the issues that have come up in this book so far. When we are at the center.

We get ourselves into trouble. We begin to treat people in ways that don't line up with those who claim to be followers of Jesus. Because the defining reality has become us.

And what we want. Wisdom is the summary topic for the book of James. Everything that we've covered so far.

[12 : 12] Everything that we will cover. Is wrapped up in this idea of wisdom. Wisdom is the bit behind listening to scripture well. Wisdom is the bit behind speaking words of life.

Wisdom is the bit behind not showing favoritism. It's the bit behind listening and doing scripture. Wisdom is the category that sums up all these moral commands.

But wisdom starts as a character issue. It plays out in morality, in specific obedience. But it starts as a character issue.

And so false wisdom here is not doing certain things. But it's the things that are done in selfish ambition. And conversely, heavenly wisdom, the good wisdom, have a look in verse 17.

Sorry, verse 13. 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.

[13 : 14] Good wisdom is displayed not in specific deeds necessarily, but in the deeds that flow out of a character that is humble. It gets unpacked for us in verse 17.

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. That is a huge list. And I'm not going to get to unpack each of those seven today in detail. And can I encourage you, if you're in a community group this week, spend time talking about each of those categories.

Reflecting on how you go in each of those things. If you're not in a community group, come and chat to Deb after church and she would love to make it possible for you to get into one. But notice that each of the things described there flow out of a place of humility.

Purity is achieved when we are drawn into Christ, when we are forgiven and washed clean. And in doing so, we are conscious and aware of our lowly position before a holy God.

[14 : 29] Being peace-loving and considerate are the opposite to demanding my rights. Are the opposite to putting my ambition first. But humility has something that comes before it.

All these things sound so noble and sound like such a good idea. To be peaceful. To be merciful. To be submissive. Which means teachable and open to being convinced.

To be impartial, sincere. It all sounds fantastic. But it's really difficult, isn't it? When you're wronged, being peace-loving is not an easy thing.

When some people are nicer to you than others or more impressive in your eyes than others, being impartial is not easy. They come from humility.

Humility. And humility is only possible when there is security. Say that again. Humility is only possible when there is security.

[15 : 37] Genuine humility. Humility is a word that we often get confused. We like to think some other Bible translations use the word meekness instead of humility. And we immediately go to the idea of weakness.

Or almost feebleness or inadequacy. But humility and meekness are more like strength restrained. It's more a conscious decision to deny rights than a lack of access to rights.

The humility that reflects heavenly wisdom is possible because there is absolute security in the God who promises to provide for his people.

Selfish ambition places me at the centre. But who's at the centre with humility? It's not just everyone else.

The contrast here is between a wisdom that is demonic and a wisdom that is heavenly. A wisdom that is unspiritual and a wisdom that has come from God. And the unspiritual wisdom puts myself in the middle.

[16 : 43] But the spiritual wisdom is not just about everyone else's needs. It has to come out of security.

It has to come from something at its core that gives you the foundation to be able to forego your rights and love those who persecute you. At the centre of heavenly wisdom and humility is God.

Heavenly wisdom is only possible in response to God showing himself to us, revealing himself to us.

Who God is must be the defining reality for what it looks like to live a wise life. I don't know if you remember, it's a few years ago now, the movie franchise The Matrix that came out.

And to watch Neo take the tablet, I can't remember which coloured tablet, and suddenly have his eyes opened to the fact that he was just part of a big computer program, being harvested by robots.

[17 : 50] He had been living in ignorant bliss. He thought that the world was the world and relationships were relationships, but actually it turns out he was just a battery for some other bigger system.

He took that pill and suddenly his eyes were opened to a truth, which reshaped his understanding of everything else that he engaged with. Every situation he was in from that point was defined by that reality.

For us as Christians, the defining reality is God. It's how he's revealed himself in the gospel.

Jimmy talked about this in week one, when we were looking at James chapter one, he talked about a gospel wisdom. What that means is that the centre of everything we value and understand is a God who has sent his son to die so that we can be forgiven.

Is a saviour who has risen to life and proved his power, proved his desire to do us good and his ability to do us good. And that becomes the lens through which we see every situation.

[19 : 01] When you are wronged and you look through the lens of a God who loves you unconditionally and he's always working for your good and he's constantly faithful and will never leave you nor forsake you, you are released to not have to fight for your rights in that moment.

To be able to, in humility, love the person, no matter how wrong they are. Now that doesn't belie the possibility of interacting and pursuing truth, but doing it from a place of security in God.

We don't have to be threatened by opposition. We don't have to fear for provision. Because in the gospel, God has promised and provided everything that we could possibly need.

Humility flows out of security. It flows out of a revelation of how majestic and powerful and loving and good our God is. And so Proverbs in the Old Testament tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

As we begin to see him, only then can we begin to see life and situations and ourselves correctly and therefore make wise choices.

[20 : 19] If we are looking at us, we are looking at what is not the defining reality. Wisdom is only found when we fix our eyes on God.

In chapter 1, verse 4, we're told that perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. It was this picture of the end that God is preparing for his people.

And that end, that maturity, that completeness, is a full knowledge of God. That's what the New Testament teaches us, that we are working towards a time when we will know and taste and experience all of God's goodness and love completely.

And then the next verse says, Wisdom is us beginning to taste that goodness of God, beginning to see that defining reality of a God who is sovereign over everything and living our lives in light of him.

I was discipling a guy in my previous church who, he was about 18 or 19 when he started kind of thinking about becoming a Christian.

[21 : 37] And he had a lot of peers who were a part of our church already who'd been very involved for a long period of time, had been trying to talk to him and get him along. And he kind of got to the point where he wanted to be a Christian.

And he was trying to figure out, who should I be trying to emulate? Who are the wise ones? Who are the ones who are getting this Christian thing right? Who I should be pursuing a similar path?

And in particular, there were two friends of his that were in front of him. One was a particularly smart guy. He was active. He was serving in church.

He knew his Bible very well. I was a pastor already at the time and this guy would often come up and challenge me on some other smart person's writings on a passage that I was talking about.

He was just very sharp intellectually and knew his Bible well. Our other friend is not a naturally academic person.

[22 : 33] Lovely. Good guy. But just doesn't love reading. Finds it hard work to wrestle with some complex ideas. But loves Jesus.

Actively tries to become more like Jesus. Regularly confesses sin. Actively pursues a Christ-like life. But to my friend who was just starting on the journey, academia and understanding seem much more impressive to him.

It presented so well. It was so intimidating to interact with compared to my slightly less impressive, but in my opinion, more godly friend.

Wisdom is more than a head issue. In fact, in this passage, it's fundamentally a heart issue. It's not less than knowledge and understanding of God, but it has to be a heart issue first.

Have a look at the kind of language that James uses as he goes into chapter 4. He's still talking about the fights and things that are resulting from their selfish ambition. He says, See, selfish ambition has now morphed and been described in the words of desire and pleasure.

[24 : 18] At the core of this false earthly wisdom is a heart that loves me more than it loves God. I mean, that's offensive language.

But according to the Bible, that's the reality. When we find tension within our church community, within our relationships, when there is fights and quarrels, where do they come from?

From a false wisdom that says, I'm the most important person in this situation, in this relationship, in this issue, in this church. And that's true for all of us.

The conviction is that if we love ourselves more than we love God, when we come to disagree or argue, the only result can be disorder, hurt, pain, evil.

The words get even stronger in verse 4. You adulterous people. Wisdom is not an intellectual category.

[25 : 42] It's relational. When we live like we're at the centre, James is saying it's like we commit adultery against God.

This is a biblical theme. Throughout all of Scripture, particularly the book of Hosea, our God is described as the faithful husband to his people. And meanwhile, his people continue to cheat on God, continue to ignore all that he has done and all that he has shown himself to be and place themselves at the centre.

But thankfully, our God is a jealous God. A God who refuses to be treated that way. Verse 5, Do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?

But he gives us more grace. He gives us more grace. As we fail, as we keep slipping back into that earthly wisdom that says, I'm at a most.

I come first. He gives us more grace. That's why it says God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. God will sometimes pull us down so that we might taste his grace and forgiveness again.

[27 : 09] So there is hope for failures like you and like me. There's hope for selfish people like you and like me. Because in his grace, God will open our eyes to see him clearly.

Selfishness is not an option when you see a God who is creator. Seeing yourself as the centre of the universe is not possible when you see a God who became human and gave his life so that you might be forgiven.

The fix for our selfish ambition is not self-denial. It's seeing Jesus in all his majesty and all his power.

The only instruction in this passage from the way that I read it comes now. That list back there in verse 17 about pure and peace-loving and considerate and submissive and full of mercy and good fruit, that's great but it's not instruction.

The path to that comes here in verse 7. Submit yourselves then to God.

[28 : 24] Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. Repent.

That's what it means. To resist the devil and to draw near to God is to come with your sin and trust him to forgive you. To wash your hands and purify your hearts is to come to God with your sin and trust that in Jesus he can and will wash not just your actions but your heart, your character.

To trust that he will open your eyes to see him more clearly so that you have the wisdom in a situation to love him more than yourself. to put others first.

To bear with the weaknesses and failures of brothers and sisters. Remember, this is written to a church. This is not a one-time step, this resisting the devil and coming near to God and washing yourself and humbling yourself.

[29 : 40] This is what it looks like to be a Christian. Come back to Jesus. The wisdom and humility and good life and harvest of righteousness that's on offer is found when we fix our eyes on the gospel.

That Jesus died for sinners and is risen and sits on the throne in heaven. When that is the defining reality, wisdom is the result.

Righteousness is the result. Humility comes and is only possible in security. And so verse 10, let it ring in your head and your heart today and tomorrow and every day that you seek to live wisely as a follower of Jesus.

Humble yourself before the Lord and he will lift you up. Recognize your failure before the Lord and he will forgive you.

Trust his provision even when others seek to oppose and hurt you and he will always provide. Trust his goodness even when you can't see how he is working and he will never fail you.

[31 : 05] recognize that he is first and in time he will lift you up.