Stowe September 22, 2024 - James 3:13-4:8a

It's good to be back with you and share on this section from James. In the verses just before today’s passage, he discusses the taming of the tongue, ending by asking if fresh water and salt water can come from the same spring.

He continues this theme as he shifts to our behaviour and our witness. That's why in the NIV at least, today’s section is prefaced by the subheading ‘Two kinds of wisdom’.

*13Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*

v.13. At the start, James is challenging us by asking a straight question. *Who is wise and understanding among you?* Many of us in the evangelical tradition might immediately think of head knowledge: understanding of scripture or theological ideas, confessions and creeds; that sort of thing. We might also think of general knowledge or life experience.

For James there is a vital and virtuous connection between understanding and life. He brings together our thoughts and deeds, one flowing out from the other. If you're wise, if you have understanding, let’s see it. We live in an age where knowledge of facts can be separated from evidence of virtue. We’ve been doing this for around 400 years, but this separation has really taken off in the last few decades. That’s why we see deadbeat politicians on both sides of the Atlantic. But James is a Christian elder and teacher from an earlier generation, who holds that our lives must manifest our faith and our faith must influence our lives.

And the motivation for our good living is *humility that comes from wisdom*. Whatever we do in our relationships with those around us, at home, at work, in society, we are to be known as people who act in humility.

Humility comes from wisdom. That's another nice connection. Because none of us is perfect, if we look at ourselves using wisdom, this will produce humility. Using this lens means that we just cannot have a high view of ourselves, doesn’t it? In Phil 2, St Paul urges us to be humble and consider others better than ourselves and reminds us that our ultimate example is Jesus himself. Let’s keep that in mind.

*14But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.*

The contrast in verse 14 is stark. If there is bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be proud or deny it. These things trip us up, don't they? Envy, ambition, boasting; all are related to our practice of comparing with others. It's the opposite of humility. It's the opposite of wisdom.

So often these emerge from a false view of who we are, or who we can be, or what we deserve. This focus on the self is completely antithetical to any sense of humility. While humility comes out of a good and healthy self-concept, envy has its roots in something rather darker.

*15Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.*

James is sarcastic in verse 15. Denying the envy and selfish ambition in our hearts, not facing up to the truth, or even boasting about it, represent a form of counterfeit wisdom. It is a way of looking at ourselves and others which is incompatible with a Christian mind and identity. For James, this sort of ‘wisdom’, placed in inverted commas in the NIV, is *earthly*, and not of God’s kingdom; *unspiritual*, and not of God’s Spirit; and *demonic*, and not of God’s nature. It is not wisdom at all, and thus he sandwiches this false way of being between two mentions of *envy and selfish ambition*, one in verse 14 and one in verse 16. Such an approach to life comes from a warped and flawed view of ourselves and each other.

*16For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

v.16. In v.14 the envy and selfish ambition were in our hearts, but here in v.16 they are obvious, active and on the move. Nothing surprising here to any of us, surely. If there are envy and selfish ambition in our hearts, disorder and all kinds of evil practices will follow. There are thus two kinds of connections. The first is between what is in a person’s heart and what he or she does. Where there's a warped or poor self-concept, the effects will be seen in what we say and do. This is the connection between the inside and the outside.

And none of us lives in complete isolation. The second connection is between the individual and the group. Disorder and evil practices essentially relate to what happens between people and among them. So James is telling us that unhealthy stuff inside each one of us can affect the whole family, group, church or whatever.

We are irrepressible, aren't we? And we are so creative! Where there is envy and lack of humility and fragile egos, we will see *every evil practice*. Sort yourselves out, says James.

*17But 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.*

v.17. James contrasts the egotistical and behavioural mess of the previous verses with the *wisdom that comes from heaven*. What a wonderful list of attributes: *pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, sincere*. There’s a powerful mixture of personal and interpersonal, isn’t there? We need to reflect on these a lot more in our personal and church life, I feel.

These are descriptions of healthy self-concept and its influence among people. People secure in themselves and comfortable around others. How much of the stress in families, work, or church comes from insecurity and poor self-esteem, and it is so toxic when it is found in leaders! Thus James wants us to be fully rounded people of faith, which requires wisdom from above.

Although we won't go there today, there are parallels with *the fruit of the Spirit* in Galatians 5:22-23. Taking the two passages together, the wisdom that comes from heaven is related to the work of the Holy Spirit. As you might expect.

*18Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*

v.18. James is conscious of the fragility of community and threats to our Christian unity, so having talked about inner weakness and outer discord, he draws attention to peacemakers. Peacemakers sort out problems and bring people back together. That doesn’t mean covering up things or denying festering realities. It means lancing boils and dealing with pus. It’s not easy or pleasant.

We may have that role or find it thrust upon us. We try to bring people together. We try to work through hurts and slights, we help people who’ve said the wrong thing and people who've taken umbrage, and we deal with cases of *foot in mouth* disease.

Look at what peacemakers do. It’s encouraging and a little surprising. They sow in peace. The preparation of the ground, the sowing of seeds of peace, the weeding and watering, all speak of care and commitment. And the eventual harvest is of *righteousness*, not personal but the righteousness of the group. When we try to bring peace, and stick at it, the result is a field of beautiful yellow-brown righteousness, swaying gently in the wind. That's so encouraging and exciting.

*41 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?*

Ch.4. v.1. Having talked about our views of ourselves, *who we are*, James now changes tack and briefly discusses *what we want*. Rather than envy and lack of humility, the issue is now our internal desires. Disorder and evil practices are replaced by fights and quarrels. As before there are connections between our individual, internal state and our behaviour and its effect on the group.

*2You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.*

v.2. This is strong stuff! We don't know if there had been a murder in the church or whether James is using hyperbole to make a point, but the implications are serious. You don't have what you want; you want more than you have. The desire for possessions and power and materialism and influence can be almost all-consuming. And James uses this old word, *covet*, which we find at the end of the Ten Commandments, as part of a summary warning about desiring other people’s *stuff*.

The phrase at the end of this verse is a little odd. *You do not have because you do not ask God*. This is important, but it *doesn’t* imply that we can ask God for whatever we want and he will give it to us.

*3When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

v.3. We should never think of God as a celestial or cosmic vending machine! If we have considered our desires to the point that we dare to bring them to God, they have already gone through a basic filtration, have they not? I suppose another round of sifting involves sensing whether wanting this or that accords with God’s character and purposes as we understand them.

Be careful with the idea of *pleasures*. God is not a killjoy, looking to cancel our nice holiday or pleasant meal or glass of wine. *Wrong motives* suggests something harmful for our spiritual and personal lives. This is a warning about focusing on things which could damage us, feed our selfish ambition, and give us unhealthy attitudes to others.

*7Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

*8Come near to God and he will come near to you.*

vv.7-8. This is a summary of what James has been teaching. Submitting ourselves to God helps us sort out our motives and reject those which don’t align with who he is. Resisting the devil is the same thing – avoiding the lure of the enemy of our souls. In addition, submitting ourselves to God means seeking our identity in him and being in a right orientation towards him. This is not a crushing, grinding our faces into the ground kind of submission, but a recognition of our status before him that is both edifying and liberating.

If submitting ourselves is an act of the will, then coming close to God is an act of the heart. It is about our trust in and affection for him. It is also about getting rid of sinful and impure motives and tendencies which get in the way.

Submitting to God and coming close to him are *signs* of wisdom and the *means* of obtaining it. They both involve humility and dependence. Yet it is easier to think about this than to do it.

For James it is simply a natural consequence of belonging to God and his people. His challenge is for us to be committed to our faith and to live in accordance with its values. May God give us his strength and Spirit in this exercise.