**Wisdom for the Battle. Sunday September 19 2021. James 3:13-4:10**

We all know the story of Cinderella. She found herself in a position of disadvantage after the remarriage of her father. Now she was treated with partiality by the other women in the blended family. The magical part of the story occurs when her fairy godmother reverses her disadvantage.

From early experiences of sibling rivalry, to favoured treatment based on intelligence or athleticism, to broken hearts when romantic feelings are rejected we all experience disappointment, favouritism, and rejection. These painful experiences can effect our social confidence and can breed patterns of envy which can subtly begin to motivate our attitudes and actions.

he community James has been addressing has been showing favouritism to the rich and powerful, they have been arrogant, bitter, angry, slanderous, judgemental and grumbling in their speech towards one another. Their community is being affected by these behaviours. James loves these people. He wants them to live as a faithful community following Jesus and showing others what following Jesus is about. This community needs to deal with the core of their problems, their motivation.

**The Battle**

They need to recognise that as followers of Jesus they are in an ongoing battle. Their relationship with God does not remove them from the challenges of living in a world that may not promote Christian values consistently. They need wisdom, God given wisdom, wisdom that is not motivated towards personal advancement, popularity or achievement.

They need wisdom which looks to God for guidance, wisdom which flows out of a relationship with God which affirms personal identity and worth and seeks the wellbeing of other people. Wisdom which promotes serving others.

James again uses various images to depict this battle in which the community is engaged. He speaks about two types of wisdom which are engaged in battle, the wisdom which comes from God, developed through relationship with God and the popular wisdom of our world, frequently driven by self-centredness or territorialism.

When James speaks of ‘*the world’* his emphasis appears to be on the common ways in which people frequently behave and those things which motivate these behaviours. Such behaviours are supported *“by the language and literature of the surrounding culture”* and can be deeply rooted in our hearts and therefore difficult to avoid or change.[[1]](#footnote-1) These patterns can easily be unquestioningly accepted and subtly lead Christians away from their primary commitment to God.[[2]](#footnote-2)

James speaks of friendship with God being at war with friendship with the world. He uses stark language to stress the seriousness of this battle. At one point he calls them *“adulteresses”,* one’s who have moved away from their first love, their love for God and taken up another love, a love for *“the world”* for things and people which they crave for their own pleasure, a self-centred love.

James sees the conflicts and disputes which mark their community as evidence that they are not operating in ways guided by the wisdom which God can give them. Rather he sees this community seeking power over one another rather than serving one another. He sees a battle raging here, a “battle between the human natural desire for envy and the divine desire for humans to do the divine will.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The Motivators**

So in the midst of this battle James points the community to the attitudes which are motivating their struggle with the wisdom of the world. He identifies that envy and selfish ambition appears to be driving their actions and particularly leading to the disputes and conflicts amongst the community. This envy was alluded to earlier in the letter when he spoke of them showing partiality to the rich, well dressed members of the community over the poor. The problems with their arrogant, angry and slanderous speech to one another was an embodiment of their zeal, ambition, cravings, desires and yearnings” [[4]](#footnote-4) their envy.

James is concerned about their communal experience. As a community they have been acting in this envious way. Such codes of behaviour when unquestioned can easily become a norm.

James is aware of the passion that the community shares. He chooses to use a variety of words based around the term for zeal “*zeloute”* as he speaks of their ambitions and greed. This is a community in a zealot infested society, they needed to learn to identify that which motivated them so that it could be harnessed for good purposes. They needed to refocus, to recognise the call of God to serve others rather than their own desires.

**The gifts of God for the journey**

James consistently seeks to help this community to see that God is offering them a better way. If their primary focus is on God, if they are commitment to God and God’s ways, and constantly opento recognising the times when they were drifting from God’s ways then God can give them wisdom. James stresses that the closer they get to God and God’s wisdom the more readily their zeal could be directed into good endeavours.

From the outset of the letter we have heard that God’s wisdom is available to God’s people. *“If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be* *given you.”[[5]](#footnote-5)* This wisdom from God *“transcends cognitive mastery of facts and information*.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This wisdom enables people to “live in God’s world in God’s way with God’s people” and to experience God’s blessing.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This wisdom is pure, holy, and sincere. It calls for wholehearted devotion to God. From this source, God’s wisdom is evidenced by traits which promote harmony, dignity and justice in the Christian community. Those who operate out of God’s wisdom will seek peace in the community through their words and actions and therefore they will be gentle, courteous, generous, just, forgiving, teachable, reflective, willing to listen and change, without hypocrisy or partiality. James had an expectation that these traits would produce concrete acts of justice and a harmonious, caring and helpful community.

Much of this description of wisdom matches ways in which God is described in Scripture. We have significant sections of Scripture which are wisdom literature and speak strongly of wisdom *Sophia* with many inferences that these descriptions also belong rightly to God. To operate in God’s wisdom requires relationship with God.

This relationship requires honesty and humility. Honesty to face and take responsibility for poor choices, for deviating from God’s ways, for getting caught up in the *“wisdom of the world”.* It requires repentance, turning to God, humbly drawing close once again to God. It requires dependence on the grace of God.

James reminds his readers, and us today, that God is always reaching out to us, drawing near to us, yearning for us. God is always ready to give the gift of God’s wisdom to all who truly seek it with integrity. God is always ready to extend grace to those who are humble.

**So this letter challenges us to reflect on questions like:**

Is the wisdom of God something that we intentionally seek?

Are we willing for God’s wisdom to be central in our lives and to therefore guide how we live?

Are we being watchful, recognising that the wisdom of our world can subtly infiltrate our thinking and push out the wisdom God would give us?

Are we open to God showing us if we are developing patterns of behaviour or attitudes which are contrary to God’s ways?

The descriptors of God’s wisdom in James 3 can be a good checklist to help us to honestly consider how much God’s wisdom is being shown in how we are living individually and as a community of followers of Jesus.

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Letter of James: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Ed) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1998) 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter John and Judah,* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James: The New international Commentary on the New Testament,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2011) 342 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 342 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James 1:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 310 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. McKnight, *The Letter of James,* 310 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)