

## Homily for Pentecost 17

James 3:13-18

*'The wisdom from above'*

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### TEXT

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. <sup>16</sup>For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. <sup>17</sup>But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. (James 3:13-18)*

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### INTRODUCTION

Put your hand up if you are wise?

No takers?

Would anybody here claim to be a person full of wisdom?

If not,

according to the Apostle James,

that's actually a good start.

He begins this little section by asking his hearers a question like that:

*'Who is wise and understanding among you?'*

For James,

if you put your hand up and say:

*'yes me! Let me tell you how wise and clever I am...'*

There's a problem.

Or, if in answer to that question you want to point to your year 12 scores,  
or your university degree,  
your credentials,  
your big book shelves full of fancy volumes,

James will suggest,  
There's a problem.

Because true wisdom,  
Is seen in one's life,  
In one's actions,  
And the character in which they are done.

He says,  
*'Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.'* (v 13)

I think this is a very relevant topic for our time.

Because it seems to me,  
we live in an age and a society which has access to more knowledge than ever before,  
  
and yet *wisdom* is in short supply.

We imagine that if we can just get the right facts and information to people,  
That will solve every problem.

But of course, it's not so.

Because many of life's difficulties and challenges are not just about having the right information,  
But what you do with it,  
about wisdom.

So what is true wisdom according to the Scriptures,  
That's what we want to think about today.

We'll see first,  
where it comes from,  
second what it looks like,  
and third, where it leads.

Where it comes from,  
What it looks like,  
And where it leads.

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## **SOURCE**

So first,  
Where does true wisdom come from?

Well, the Scriptures point us consistently to one answer,

True wisdom comes from the Lord God,  
From our Father in heaven.

The Apostle James' phrase here to express this is *'the wisdom from above'*,  
Which is to say the wisdom from *heaven*,  
The wisdom from God.

He's picking up on a theme he introduced right back in his first chapter,  
when he said:

*'If any of you is lacking wisdom, ask God,  
who gives generously and ungrudgingly,  
and it will be given you.'* (1:5)

Behind this is the whole tradition of wisdom in the Old Testament which teaches the same truth.

Most famously in Proverbs chapter 2:

*'For the Lord gives wisdom;  
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;  
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright...'* (Prov 2:6,7).

We might think too of Solomon,

Who asks and is given by God *'a wise and discerning mind'* (1 Kings 3).

*'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'*. (Prov 9:10).

True wisdom comes from God.

So again,

*'If any of you is lacking wisdom, ask God...'* (1:5),  
James says.

Similar, in our text today,  
*'you do not have, because you do not ask'*.

This is simple and straightforward,  
But easily overlooked,  
Perhaps for that reason.

If true wisdom doesn't come from inside you,  
Or from resources of this world alone,  
But from God,

The first and most obvious way to access and grow in this wisdom,

Is to ask God for it.

Have you asked God for wisdom?

Like Solomon.

We can ask generally,

But in the specifics too.

In those dilemmas you and your family face,  
In those difficult decisions you need to make,

Ask God,  
For the wisdom from above.

And as you ask turn to his Word which is the revelation of his wisdom,  
And mediate on it day and night.

It's interesting, by the way,  
How James' wisdom from above and below,

Is quite similar to Paul's fruit of the Spirit,  
And works of the flesh.

So we could say this wisdom is given by the Father as we ask him in the name of Jesus,  
And worked in us by the Spirit through his Word.

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Now in James this is an important emphasis,  
That true wisdom comes from God,  
especially because of the alternative.

Notice how much of a stark contrast James wants to set before us,

Between the wisdom from above,  
And this other wisdom from below.

The either-or he presents to us,  
can be a bit confronting.

Because we might tend to think that Godly wisdom is sort of the natural wisdom of this world with  
some extra spiritual stuff sprinkled on top.

Or we might think that there's God's wisdom,  
The devil's wisdom,

And then this sort of neutral territory in between.

But here James wants us to see that, in fact,  
the wisdom from below,

The wisdom of this earth alone without any reference to God,

The so-called wisdom that arises from my heart,  
And from yours,

Is not neutral,

It's unspiritual,

It's devilish and demonic.

And you can see this in how it operates.

Which leads us to our next consideration,  
The character of true wisdom.

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## **CHARACTER**

What characterises the wisdom from below,  
This earth-bound wisdom?

Well, there are two big words or phrases James focuses on here:  
*'Bitter envy'* or *'jealousy'*,  
And *'selfish ambition'*.

So let's think a little about these.

First, *bitter envy* or *bitter jealousy*.

What is this?

Here's one definition of the word in context:

*'Bitter envy or jealousy is an intensely negative attitude toward another person's achievement or success'.*

Have you ever seen a child destroy a creation of another child's,  
Maybe a craft or lego creation,

One child has worked hard,  
But another child wrecks it,  
Seemingly because they just couldn't bear to see that other child do well.

That's bitter envy,  
And adults just do it to each other in more subtle and sophisticated ways for the most part.

As we heard last week,  
Often destroying people without tongues.

What about '*Selfish ambition*'?

The word used here is often translated strife or rivalry.

So a definition of this one in context might be:

*'A divisive willingness to split the group in order to achieve personal power and prestige.'*

Selfish ambition says,

*'I don't care what happens to everyone else or even the cause we're working together on,  
As long as I come out looking good.'*

A bit like the disciples in our Gospel reading today,  
Arguing about who is the greatest.

'Bitter envy',  
'jealousy',  
'Selfish ambition',  
'rivalry',

Have you seen these at work in the world?

Have you seen these at work in the church?

Most importantly,  
Can you see these at work in your own heart?

*'Don't be boastful and false to the truth'*, James says,  
This wisdom from below is how each of us naturally operates.

And notice too the little adjective attached to envy,

That it's *bitter* envy.

This is something of the nature of envy and jealousy,  
Perhaps of this wisdom from below in general,

It doesn't leave a good taste in your mouth,  
Or that of anyone else's,

It's not enjoyable.

It leaves bitterness.

This is the wisdom from below.

But what about the character of the wisdom from above,  
The wisdom we want,  
The wisdom God gives and cultivated in us by his Spirit?

Well, it the opposite of everything we've just been talking about!

*It 'is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy'. (v 17)*

Now the list seems to work sort of like this.

The first one, purity,  
is the overarching characteristic of this wisdom,

and is to be thought of first in relation to God,  
as well as to other people.

One commentator says,  
*'To be pure means to be wholly completely aligned with God,  
seeking to imitate him and live according to his commandments and laws. Those who are pure have  
decided to reject sin and choose God.'*

This is the opposite of being double-minded,  
Spiritual adulterous,

Mixing in the wisdom from the below with the wisdom from above.

True wisdom is pure.

Then the next three characteristics go together describing attitudes or approaches to dealing with  
other people,  
*'Peaceable, gentle, willing to yield...'*

This is a conciliatory person isn't it?

This is the opposite of that selfish ambition.

This is one who is open to others  
To listening to other points of view,  
To cooperation,  
One who is even ready to yield to the preferences of others.

Now one big concern here of course is that this breeds weakness.

But as one Christian from history said,  
*'Nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength'.*

We see this in Jesus himself, which I'll come back to later.

This wisdom from above is *'full of mercy and good fruits'*,

True wisdom acts in compassion for others,

True wisdom forgives and overlooks the sins and faults of others.

This is what the wisdom from above looks like,  
And as James says,

You know it when you see it.

Which leads us to consider as well,  
Where true wisdom leads.

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## **OUTCOME**

Because these two types of wisdom from below and above lead to very different places,

And both have in view communal life together as God's people,

Whether it's in a marriage,

A family,

A small group of Christians of one kind or another,

A congregation,

Or a larger Church like the whole LCA.

What does the wisdom from below lead to?

Two things James says,  
*'disorder and wickedness of every kind.'*

So this earthly wisdom where we want to put yourself first,  
Promote ourselves,  
Get ahead by pushing others down,

It pushes people apart,  
It divides,

It brings disorder,  
Even chaos.

As well as,  
*'wickedness of every kind'.*



A tragic part of evil is that it spreads and multiplies like a virus.

It's rubs off on each other in the community,  
And things go from bad to worse.

But then on the other side is the wisdom we want,  
The wisdom from above,  
And what does that lead to?

Well,

*<sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*

Whereas the earthly wisdom leads to disorder,  
God's wisdom leads to peace,

Peace in marriages,  
Peace in families,  
Peace in congregation and churches.

And whereas the earthly wisdom leads to every kind of wickedness,  
The wisdom from above leads to a harvest of righteousness.

It too spreads and multiplies,

Like a crop of wheat,

And people are lead to live before God and others in good and right ways,

Others see the beauty of this wisdom from above lived out in community and are drawn to God,

To be made right with him.

We know this by our own experience don't we?

When you see this sort of heavenly wisdom in people around you,

Which I have been blessed to see many times in this congregation and elsewhere,

It's encouraging,  
Inspiring even,  
It rubs off,

It makes you want to seek that and learn that and cultivate that.

This is where true wisdom leads.

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## CONCLUSION

*'So who is wise and understanding among you?'*

Do you recognize this selfish ambition and bitter envy in your own heart?

Do you see its results in disorder and wickedness?

Do you long for this wisdom from above and the life of peace and righteousness it leads to?

Well, let me add one more point.

This teaching on wisdom from the Apostle James is immensely important,  
True,  
practical,  
And relevant.

But let us remember too that for Christians the wisdom from above is not finally a set of proverbs,  
But a person.

Jesus Christ, the New Testament says,  
Is our wisdom.

He is the one who has come down from above.

And he is the one who is above all,  
Pure,  
Gentle,  
Humble,  
Full of mercy.

He is the one who comes to bring peace.

St Paul says,  
*'we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.'* (1 Cor 1:24)

Your Lord Jesus died for you,  
To forgive you and purify you from all the ways you have succumb to living by the wisdom from below.

As the Risen Lord he is now with you,  
You are untied to him by baptism and faith,

So that, by his Spirit, you can grow in the true wisdom from above.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.