

Scripture for Sept 19, 2021

1 Kings 3:5-12 (NIV)

⁵ At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

⁶ Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. ⁷ “Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. ⁸ Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. ⁹ So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

¹⁰ The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. ¹¹ So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, ¹² I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.

James 3:13 – 4:34, 6b-8a (NIV)

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But 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. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

⁴ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You 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. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? ^{6b} That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”¹ ⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you.

¹ Prov 3:34.

Sermon: Wisdom and Humility

King Solomon is known for many things including securing the kingdom of Israel and being its greatest king, for the Temple that was built during his reign, for his wealth, and for his number of wives! And as our Old Testament reading indicated, Solomon is also famously known for his *wisdom*, and because of that reputation, the wise sayings of the book of Proverbs are attributed to him.² At the beginning of the book of James he says, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask *God*, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.”³ Like in the story of Solomon, God is seen as the true source of wisdom and these opening words to James’ letter is advice to churches who are not only dispersed across the Roman empire, but are experiencing suffering and hardship.⁴ His message – not unlike a farewell speech - is to encourage the next generation of Christians *not* to be lost in the sea of new ideas or be full of doubt, rather to know that a generous God provides wisdom to those churches who ask.⁵ Paul also tells us that one of the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to the church is wisdom,⁶ and coupled with that is *discernment* so that we can recognize that what is said is actually wise.⁷ Moreover, Paul distinguishes between wisdom and knowledge. He doesn’t say that every individual in the church will be given wisdom, discernment, or knowledge, but that God’s Spirit provides those gifts – and others – so that the whole church as a community can faithfully carry on the kingdom of God work that Jesus began.

Where do we go today for wisdom? Maybe it’s Google, Wikipedia, social media, a self-help guru, a leadership expert, a motivational speaker, or perhaps even a book! Search engines have algorithms that list things in terms of *popularity*, and social media feeds remember our *history* and can suggest new pages in such way as to reinforce our own biases. Neither way to organize information is particularly wise. And if we happen to wander into a bookstore or library, *which* book has the information we require? Can we *trust* its author? Are its contents reliable? It may contain information, but does it contain *wisdom*? How would we know? Sometimes we follow an author we like, but shouldn’t we also be broadening our reading habits and see what different writers are saying on a given topic? I would say “Yes”! If you think about it, much has happened in just *one* decade, and now - in part because of those options and algorithms - we are rife with false narratives and conspiracy theories that are anti-science and anti-truth. And in a postmodern world they are given credence because we have lost the ability to differentiate information from wisdom, even to recognize truth. I think that to some degree, we are losing – or have lost - our way. Let me give one example: On Facebook this week someone wanted a religious exemption from having the COVID shot because he genuinely believed getting the

² Along with the Wisdom of Solomon. (This does not mean he actually wrote them, but maybe some of the sayings!)

³ Jas 1:5. See also Eph 1:17.

⁴ Not only is the context of Greek (philosophical) wisdom, but later the Gnostics thought that personal wisdom was mystically available/revealed to select individuals. Depending on the dating of the letter of James, he may be countering that emerging view. Nevertheless, Jewish sages saw wisdom as coming from God, not as a result of human attainment.

⁵ This is in the context of *collective* church ministry, not merely individuals.

⁶ 1 Cor 12:8. Note wisdom is not merely knowledge. See also 1 Cor 1:18-25;

<https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Scandal-of-the-Cross.pdf> and <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/We-Have-the-Mind-of-Christ.pdf> .

⁷ Paul calls this the “ability to distinguish between the spirits” (1 Cor 12:10), see also Rom 12:2.

vaccine would disqualify him from entering heaven! That is truly tragic, as well as being ridiculous theology for all sorts of reasons – not that I expect him to believe me. So where do we go today for wisdom?

James, having said all wisdom is from God, asks “*Who* is wise and discerning among you?”⁸ In the whirlwind of ideas, who do you regard as stable, sensible, and a source of wisdom in your Christian community, asks James. And he responds: look for someone with *integrity* and whose actions are wrapped in *grace* and *humility*.⁹ The opposite of that he says is someone with selfish ambition, envious, bitter, or arrogant.¹⁰ Their so-called “wisdom” is not from God.¹¹ Rather than heavenly, it’s earthly advice on how to get ahead in the world and make a name for yourself. Moreover, says James, what they say doesn’t bring people together, it drives them apart, creating tensions and disorder, rather than fostering peace.¹² It may be that such a person is clever and has a skillful tongue, or has a large on-line following, but the effect of such an individual on a committee, in the workplace, in a church, in political party, is to sow distrust and division, and to disturb personal relationships. James shines a spotlight on the *fruits* of a person’s words and behavior and uses that as the practical criterion to discern whether or not their “wisdom” is from God. It seems to me that James is offering excellent advice. Instead of hypocrisy and favoritism, James concludes that God’s wisdom is pure and seeks right relationships between people and with God. And a person exhibiting God’s wisdom knows when to be merciful, to compromise, to be gentle and peaceable.¹³ Integrity matters, our words and actions matter, and they reveal their true source.

Speaking of conflicts and disputes, James goes on to ask, “What’s their true origin?”¹⁴ And he replies, their root cause is down to *envy*.¹⁵ We want what we do not have and if we allow that craving to develop and become our ruling passion, so that we will do anything to obtain it, including theft and ultimately violence.¹⁶ Now that might seem over the top, but the hugely-influential advertising industry is tapping into our desire for things we would like to possess in one way or another. Think too in a broader way to a country’s foreign policies and recognise some of the self-centered decisions that can lead to oppression, sanctions, and ultimately war over such things as trade, oil, and natural resources - things a country can covet - and greed will do whatever it takes to acquire them. Envy is self-centered and, if uncontrolled, will destroy all kinds of relationships. It’s not about what we need, it’s about what we *want*.¹⁷ And James is acknowledging that conflicts and disputes are to be found within the church, something we know from within our own denomination.¹⁸

⁸ Jas 3:13. In Jas 3:1 he warns of the dangers and responsibilities of leaders and teachers – potential sources of wisdom.

⁹ Jas 3:13. If you genuinely can’t recognize anyone with those qualities you are either in the wrong place or blind!

¹⁰ Jas 3:14.

¹¹ Jas 3:15.

¹² Jas 3:16. Jesus also stressed that “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt 5:9).

¹³ Jas 3:17. Wisdom is not a possession; it is something we practice - and recognize in the words and actions of others.

¹⁴ Jas 4:1.

¹⁵ In talking about *envy*, he resonates with the moral wisdom of the Greco-Roman world, and so connect with his readers. It is also the theme of the *Testament of Simeon*.

¹⁶ Jas 4:2. (“murder.”)

¹⁷ In the Lord’s prayer we ask, “Give us our daily bread.” We are repeatedly asking God to simply provide for what we need to *live*.¹⁷ Note: in the exodus, God is shown as providing for the people’s daily needs; Exod 16:1-17:7.

¹⁸ See also 1 Cor 3:1-3. James is *not* addressing the activity of Jewish zealots here!

James then says, “You do not have, because you do not pray. And when you ask you don’t receive because your motives are wrong; you are focused on your own desires.”¹⁹ It’s certainly true that if we *don’t* pray, we have no grounds to expect our prayers to be answered; that’s like wanting to win the lottery but refusing to buy a ticket! But others are troubled by self-doubt and self-blame that unanswered prayer is down to their own fault. I have even heard of some who only pray for *others*, not themselves, so as to circumvent that apparent obstacle! That may sound noble, but it represents a harsh, fearful view of God rather than a God of love, grace, and generosity. But more than that, it takes James’ meagre words on the larger topic of prayer out of context. This whole section is about *wisdom*. As I said at the outset, James begins his letter with: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask *God*, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.”²⁰ He now says, “You don’t have (wisdom), because you don’t pray. And when you ask you don’t receive because you are focused on your own desires.”²¹ That context is important, if we are ruled by our passions we will not be inclined to seek, recognize, or welcome God’s wisdom. The Lord’s prayer has the line “Thy will be done” not “*my* will be done.” Given this scenario, it makes sense that James would quote this proverb to his readers: “God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble.”²² If we come to God asking for wisdom, we need to first acknowledge our need and our limitations, that we don’t know it all. James is confident that God will respond, for he says: “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you . . . humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.”²³ In this James is echoing the psalmist who writes, “The sacrifice God desires is a humble spirit—O God, a humble and repentant heart you will not reject.”²⁴

Underlying James’ take on wisdom is the view that there are *two* types of wisdom. One is heavenly, the other is worldly, one is from God and the other is from the devil. That black and white thinking can be troubling to many today. One of the difficulties we have with James’ dualism is that he describes the “world” in such negative terms, and *we* don’t think human wisdom is necessarily bad or evil. That’s simply because James is using strong, apocalyptic language to get his point across. Let’s remember that God has created a *good* creation and has given us minds and expects us to use them. Human wisdom *can* coincide with that of God. When we are creative, life-giving, and responsible we are aligning with God’s values.²⁵ That is one reason why many Christians, including me, give *thanks to God* – the source of wisdom - for the scientists who have devised the various COVID vaccines. Yet we also know we humans have a dark side and that can be destructive to ourselves, our relationships, and to our environment. For example, earlier James has a lot to say about how damaging our speech can be and

¹⁹ Jas 4:2b-3.

²⁰ Jas 1:5 9.

²¹ Jas 4:2b-3.

²² Jas 4:6, citing Prov 3:34. The link between wisdom and humility (cf. gentleness) was made earlier too; Jas 3:13, 17. It addresses the sin of hubris – excessive pride and thinking we are “God” (cf. the story of Adam and Eve.)

²³ Jas 4:7, 10. The authenticity/nature of one’s humility is spelt out in Jas 4:8-9.

²⁴ Ps 51:17 (NET)

²⁵ This is divine commission to be shepherds/gardeners of God’s creation, which leads to responsible social justice.

the continual need to tame our tongues.²⁶ We all know that we say things in the heat of the moment that we regret later, and for which we (hopefully) apologize. But a pressing, darker issue is wilful, repeated lying and distorting the truth for our own ends. Paul also warns of false and deceitful leaders – especially preachers – who, like the devil, are “masquerading as angels of light.”²⁷ And in the context of the COVID vaccines, such prevalent lies have become destructive for society as a whole, are overwhelming our health-care system on which we all depend, and devastating those whose family members have died or who are very seriously sick as a result of believing a lie. By mentioning this current polarizing issue, we can begin to appreciate the stark black and white point James is making, while also acknowledging the need for the nuance of grey.²⁸

Having said that, I think another underlying point of James is that human knowledge, including profound thinking that we deem to be wise, will *not* on its own lead us to divine wisdom.²⁹ To know the mind of God requires, of necessity, divine *revelation*. That means God needs to reveal that insight to us. Christians believe that Jesus the Messiah is the ultimate revelation of God, even – to borrow Old Testament imagery - wisdom *personified*.³⁰ Paul speaks of Jesus Christ as the embodiment of “God’s power and wisdom.”³¹ And the Gospel writers often portray Jesus in the tradition of a Jewish sage, with his wise teachings and parables. Moreover, Jesus describes the kingdom of God as having the *opposite* values to those of this world. And, as I mentioned earlier, Paul saw wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit given to the church to continue Christ’s mission.

Now James’ *readers* understand where he was coming from with his two types of wisdom³² and they recognize that James is encouraging them to pursue *spiritual transformation*.³³ He perceives that their attitudes are not fully aligned with those of God. They are trying to have it both ways. They have divided loyalties between friendship with God³⁴ and his values and with those of the world – or, in James’ language, those of the devil! James says that they are being pulled in different directions and are therefore “doubled-minded” or wishy-washy. Like the Old Testament prophets, he sees our relationship with God as a marriage commitment and that our unfaithfulness implies adultery!³⁵ Make up your mind,

²⁶ Jas 3:1-12.

²⁷ See 2 Cor 11;1-15, esp. 13-14.

²⁸ As mentioned earlier, that’s another reason why James wants his readers to carefully discern a wise leader as someone with *integrity* and whose actions are wrapped in *grace* and *humility* (Jas 3:13).

²⁹ This is a feature of Gnosticism and deductive reasoning of the Greek philosophers.

³⁰ Wisdom is personified in Prov 3:19–20; 8:22–36; Sir 24:8–9; Wis 7:24–28.

³¹ 1 Cor 1:24.

³² This is evidenced in that James spends no time justifying this notion in his letter.

³³ Jas 1:18, 21 shows that James is not writing to those “in the world” but to those already reborn by God’s word of truth. This idea of spiritual transformation is also present in the conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus (John 3). He was a religious leader who did not fully understand heavenly things and was more focused on earthly things. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Confusing-Conversation-with-Nicodemus.pdf> .

³⁴ Friendship with God also mentioned in Jas 2:23-24 as being modelled by Abraham (cf. Jas 4:4).

³⁵ See Jas 4:4 (James uses the strong language of the Old Testament prophets: Hos 3:1; Isa 1:21; 50:1; Jer 3:7-10; 13:27; Ezek 16:23-26; 23:45.)

stop being unfaithful, be loyal to God, exhorts James. Spiritual transformation is a process, and we are to *choose* it. That means, in James' words, "Resisting the devil and coming to God."³⁶ If instead we flirt with temptation, don't expect God to bail us out, but according to James, if we acknowledge our need of God, we can be sure God's grace will overcome those negative passions that distort human life.³⁷ As Christians we continually live with this tension, and we can find strength by developing good habits, including being supported by others.³⁸ (We will talk more about that next week.) Furthermore, in our struggles, we can be sure God is more powerful than evil.

In conclusion, where do you and I go to seek wisdom? One place is in the Scriptures because Christians have, over many centuries, discovered they contain wisdom that speaks beyond their writer's immediate context and into our own times. That's a key reason our faith community believes such texts are *inspired* by God and that through those texts God himself has spoken. Nevertheless, we need to be discerning and wise in how we read and apply those texts today.³⁹ The letter of James is categorized as Christian wisdom literature⁴⁰ and I believe that once we allow for its bold rhetorical style it is still of relevance for us, especially given the increasingly polarized forces in our own society - not only as a result of tensions over COVID but of politics and at a time of a general election. I ask that we carefully reconsider our go-to sources of wisdom and how we use them. And as James says, "Look for integrity in leaders whose actions are done in humility and wisdom.⁴¹ Remember, divine wisdom is pure, peace-loving, gentle, open to persuasion, full of mercy and good deeds, impartial, and sincere."⁴² Because we need such wisdom, let us "draw near to God."⁴³ Let us pray.

³⁶ Jas 4:7.

³⁷ Jas 4:8-10. Reconsider Jas 1:2, 13-15 in this context. Our trials (or "testing"), which are *not* from God, results in perseverance and maturity – if we are faithful. According to James, our temptations are from our "own evil desire" – envy (i.e., a disease of the human heart!) And "after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." The only solution, according to James, is an authentic whole-hearted turning to God (Jas 4:7-10).

³⁸ See Gal 6:1-10. ("Good habits" include spiritual disciplines/practices.)

³⁹ An important feature of those texts is how they describe *reality*, by that I mean the relationship between God and the world/creation. That's complicated because that view of reality evolves with time (and from the Old to the New Testaments) and is varied (or contain different emphases) among the New Testament writers. Scholars help us see the big picture. One thing for sure is that reality *includes* God! And if we try to exclude God, we are foolish, not wise.

⁴⁰ In the vein of Jewish wisdom literature, such as Proverbs and Sirach.

⁴¹ Jas 3:13

⁴² Jas 3:17.

⁴³ Jas 4:8.