

Harvest of Righteousness

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

The church has understood the book of James as a book emphasizing the importance of works for revealing faith. However the book as a whole isn't about works so much as about wisdom. And true wisdom is not about actions so much as the integration of thought, will, action, and context. Not faith *or* works; faith *and* works made up true wisdom.

Our scripture in James offers three questions for us as the Christian community: The first is: Who is wise and understanding among you? (Jas. 3:13a) The second question is: From what do conflicts and disputes arise? (This is a paraphrase of Jas. 4:1) And the third question is: What does God want? (An interpretive question arising from Jas. 4:5 and lived out in Jas. 4:7-8a)

Who Is Wise and Understanding among You? We may think that the answer to this question would be the clergy and church officers of the congregation. Isn't this how they attained their important offices within the life of the church? We all certainly hope that wisdom and maturity of faith are criteria for such decisions, but this is not what James says. In our passage, James lifts up a number of markers of the evidence of God-given wisdom in the life of individuals. These include: gentle or humble (Jas. 3:13b, pure (3:17), peaceable (3:17), willing to yield (3:17), full of mercy (3:17), without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy (3:17). We pray that this describe some of the people that are members of this congregation!

These are difficult traits to live into. They speak of a life that is not ego-driven, not grasping or envious. In a society that is centered on self-gratification, often at the expense of others, these words sound alien and countercultural.

However we know people that sit among us in our congregation who embody these traits. Think about how they live this out in their daily lives. What practices or habits help them to live into God's wisdom? Are there ways that what they are doing can be applied to the life we share in our church community? Are you reading *Jesus Calling*, the daily devotional for extremely busy people. Maybe you are one who reads *Our Daily Bread* and shares its wisdom with those you meet each day. Maybe those who demonstrate wisdom from above are those who praying for each other. Maybe those with wisdom from above call and check on others.

James also wants to know: ***From What Do Conflicts and Disputes Arise?*** Within any relationship, family, or community, there will be times of disagreement. James looks at these conflicts and sees at their core the attitude or sin of envy (3:16; 4:1-3). He may call it different things—selfish ambition (3:16), cravings (4:1), coveting (4:2)—but it really comes down to desiring what another has. James sees this as a sin that feeds on itself, craving ever more, asking for the wrong things, escalating in violence until the taking ends in death (4:2).

When we look at our society, we see this "earthly, unspiritual, devilish" wisdom all around us. Children desire brand-name clothing, because they see others who wear that clothing as popular and happy. Youth crave the latest in tech toys so they can communicate and promote the self 24-7. Adults look for the greatest car, house, and job that will promote the lifestyle that they believe will bring them fulfillment. Sometimes family members are objectified in this way, looking for the "best provider," "show wife," or the "genius children" as a measure of self-worth and achievement.

Marketing capitalizes on these attitudes. We are told via commercials that we can be happy if we just use a particular toothpaste or weight-loss remedy. We

envy others who appear to embody or have what we want, making over ourselves and our homes in their images.

One of the most frightening commercials of the past year promotes a family vehicle. The father arrives with excitement, having just completed a tree house for his children. He finds his young sons playing cards in the vehicle. When the father invites the boys to come play in his creation, the boys respond with a series of questions, asking if the tree house has leather seats, a DVD player, and amazing speakers, among other things. Is this what the family relationship has become, simply a weighing of the attributes of different products?

So, *What Does God Want?* James exhorts us to submit ourselves to God. This implies that we are to repent, turning away from this grasping lifestyle that leads to violence. There is a fourth question, embedded in 4:5. The question asks us who will be our authority. God is yearning and searching for the human spirit that mirrors God's own image. Therefore, in choosing to draw near to God, we are throwing off the power that earthly wisdom has over us.

What then does life look like in the church community that lives by God's wisdom? Here are some of the marks of a wise church that this passage provokes:

- Church officers are chosen on the criteria of godly wisdom, rather than popularity or how much money they give to the church.
- Worship leadership is not just handled by a few, but is shared among the church membership of all ages and stations.
- Disputes are handled with mercy and love, seeking peace above selfish ambition.
- Stewardship becomes not just a pledge collection, but a spiritual discipline taught and lived by the community.

- Prayer is not selfish, asking for what will feed individual desires, but seeks the good fruits that will meet the needs of all.
- Peacemaking and social-justice ministries become ways of addressing the earthly wisdom that surrounds us.

Our primary identity is measured by our closeness to God rather than the possessions we accumulate.

The world will give us many messages about who we are to be, but at our baptism our primary calling is as children of God, and we are to remind each other of this wisdom. **Kathy L. Dawson**

We have been given...

¹⁷ ... 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. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

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