

Wisdom and Living Well 2021
James 3:13-4:1, 7-8, 10 Philippians 4:1, 4-8

James 3:13-4:1, 7-8, 10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Philippians 4:1, 4-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Last week the memorial services were held
for two of our very faithful, active and long-time church members,
each of whom made a difference in the life of this church.
In both of their services, reflecting on their lives, I pointed out
that a **well-lived life is really no small accomplishment.**

So in your opinion, **what does a good and well-lived life look like?**
or as James reflects on that question, vs. 13,

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

"wise and understanding"
that is something quite different than academic knowledge.

Knowledge is knowing that by definition, a tomato is really a fruit,
and wisdom is knowing not to put a tomato in a fruit salad.
Knowledge is knowing what the true facts really are,
and wisdom is knowing not to correct your teacher during class.

James recognizes that wisdom and understanding
are most truly revealed by how we choose to live out our lives,
either according to the **wisdom of this world** or **wisdom from above.**

It's really a question of which voice or influence we follow,
which is really a question of choosing our ultimate priorities,

deciding what we value most, which defines our goals & desires,
which according to James, is a reflection of
choosing between the **two contrasting wisdoms,**
with each producing its own outcome and consequence.

Let's unpack that. There is earthly or worldly wisdom,
referring to the values & priorities this world holds to be truth,
which according to James includes selfish ambition, envy and boastfulness.

Or in sharp contrast, James describes **wisdom from above,**
wisdom from God as revealed in Scripture and the life of Christ,
a wisdom that leads toward life as God intends for us.

The wisdom we choose will determine what we do and what we say,
which in turn produces the consequences that follow...

... as James explains, vs. 14a, 15-16

But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, ... Such wisdom does not come down from above,
but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and
wickedness of every kind.

Do you remember a popular poster in the 1980's
that said, "He who dies with the most toys wins"?,
that's an example of earthly or worldly wisdom.

But since no one ever got to take their toys with them,
clearly acquiring material wealth and things alone
does not constitute wisdom from above or a life well-lived.

Consider what our culture and world seem to value most ---
--- based on what we see as the priorities in popular media,
based on the sort of behavior happening in our culture,
what are the consequences that we can observe?

Today,
our culture is divided, quick to assign blame in rhetorical rants,
preoccupied, corrupt and polarized toward winning at any cost
with viciousness & bitter hatred for those who dare disagree.
Businesses and careers being canceled if somebody feels offended,
a broken culture committed to silencing any opposing opinions...

... and as a consequence or outcome,
our governments, our institutions, our economy and politics
are in a downward spiral, barely fulfilling their function ...
... all based on flawed thinking & the wisdom of our popular culture.

Clearly we are not living the joy, peace and justice God intends.

Typical of James,
the words he uses to describe earthly wisdom or wisdom of this world
are harsh, stark, clear, aggressive and challenging:
"bitter envy, selfish ambition, boastful, false to the truth, disorder, wickedness, earthly, unspiritual, devilish,
conflicts and disputes, and cravings at war"

James is saying that our actions --- our words, deeds, and attitudes
all serve to reveal the sort of wisdom we're choosing to follow,
and whether we are worldly-wise or godly-wise.

In contrast to the ways, values and striving of this world & culture,
and the modes of thinking that this world & culture consider wise,
James lifts up a whole different set of values, vs. 13b, 17-18

Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

The inference is a gentle & peaceful life of faithful relationships
a reasonable life characterized by getting along with others,
that trusts the power, perfection, promises & sovereignty of God.

It is a confidence in God's goodness that it will all end right,
all according to God's gracious healing-saving purpose
which means that our lives blossom and bloom in abundance ...

**... so it is not necessary for me to crush and destroy the opposition,
even amid the worst of my struggles and challenging situations.
And rather than complaint, bitterness, fear, resentment or anger,
my life can convey the truth of God's gracious love and promises.**
That's the difference between earthly wisdom and wisdom from above.

It's about choosing to focus on noticing the blessings of God
and striving to be thankful and joyful, reasonable and peaceable ...
... which shifts our focus off of our own self and our troubles,
and onto **a more faithful God-centered gratitude and joy,
creating in us a deep contentment and compassion for other people.**

In James, it's either follow Jesus as 1st priority, i.e. godly-wisdom,
or we are choosing to follow the destructive wisdom of this world.
James does not allow a safe and moderate middle ground for us.

For James it's about having a clear and pragmatic focus on God, vs. 7-8
Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

That is also Paul's message in the Philippians passage we heard,
to stay focused on God's abiding grace, purpose and purposes,
trusting that no matter what we're seeing, **God will always prevail.**

Listen to Paul's instructions and assurance even though
he's a prisoner of Rome under the threat of execution, vs. 4-7
Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

As a pastor, I have seen considerable human suffering and struggle,
and the words, "rejoice", or "thanksgiving", or "praise"
are not normally what I hear from people amid trial & trouble.

But I have observed that when trouble or when a crisis does strike,
some people will fall and remain crushed, and become embittered,
while others manage to endure with truly amazing grace,
& adjust with unimaginable faith, courage & strength.

**And this isn't determined by the severity of their situation,
as much as it is, a reflection of their heart, hope and attitude.**

I see folks who at the least little thing will make crazy & fall apart,
while others will somehow withstand unbelievable blows
and keep on singing joyfully and praising God's goodness.

This is in no way about a false or blind refusal to face reality,
and Paul is not saying smile anyway and just try to be happy.

For notice, that Paul does not write, "rejoice always",
but rather his words are, "rejoice **in the Lord** always."
The Lord is the critical factor, the power to sustain
and who makes the rejoice amid trouble a possibility.

Paul is saying that because the Lord is near and we know it,
because of who God is, God's promises and what God does,
the coming of Christ defeats any need for anxiety or fear.

Paul's greatest joy is derived through his assurance from God
that nothing in all of creation can separate us
from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord ...
... for what really matters, is that we belong to God!

Actually, the joy, hope and trust that Paul is describing,
is a bold and defiant joy, despite whatever else is going on,
because even amid our worst calamity or disappointment,
by faith, we know that God's love will sustain
and will support us through whatever comes our way,
therefore, joy & peace are not dependent on external circumstances.

Our joy & peace come from living within a real relationship with God,
as God intends & desires for us, as God created & equipped us to live.
Joy along with peace come as God's gracious gift
with the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives.

The question is,
what does it mean for Jesus to dwell in us and among us,
and truly be, the absolute sovereign Lord of our lives?

It means that we let God's grace draw us nearer and deeper,
and allow God's Holy Spirit to fill, flow and guide us
by choosing to follow the wisdom of God from above.

It is consciously and deliberately living with careful intention,
a life of faith that makes more room for God's gracious love,
a relationship that puts us within the purpose & intent of God,
and capable of faithfully reflecting the grace of God
as we learn to walk ever more trustingly with our Lord.

Our faith journey is an open pathway for Jesus to change us,
a life-long process of spiritual development and discernment,
and since God is sovereign **we're called to trust God's wisdom & power**
to complete fully the working of God's grace, will & saving purpose.

I cannot explain it, but by experience I can promise that it is true,
that if we will focus our attention and attitude
upon catching glimpses of God's love and grace

so that we can thank, trust and submit to the Lord,
then surely the gift of joy & peace will overtake us.

It just happens when by faith we trust and allow the Lord God
to do his works of grace, healing and compassion through us,
and so we can rejoice, live in peace amid any situation.

One time a patron commissioned an artist to paint **a picture of peace.**
The artist presented his work,
a painting that showed armies laying down their weapons of war,
and the patron said, "Nice picture, but no that's not it."

Later the artist presented another painting,
this time it was a beautiful and restful pastoral scene,
and again, "No, that's still not what I have in mind."

The artist returned to his studio, and tried again.
This time the picture was of a rocky shoreline with a raging storm,
with fierce winds and huge waves crashing down on the rocks,
and way up high into the cliff
there was a tiny dry crevice with a bird
tucked in her nest safely waiting out the storm...
... and the patron said to the artist, "Yes, that's it exactly."

Reading our texts from *The Message*, (James 3:18, Philippians 4:6-7)

Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom.

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.