

A Word for the Wise

James 3:13-4:1, 7, 8a
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A wise and religious man sat under a mango tree in his garden, gazing at the pumpkin vines growing nearby. He said to himself, “How foolish God is. Here he puts a big heavy pumpkin onto a weak vine, which can’t do anything but just lie on the ground. And then he hangs those small mangoes on a tree which can hold the weight of a man. If I were God, I think I could do better than that.” Just then a breeze came and knocked a loose mango off the tree. It fell right on his head, leaving the man with a small lump that made him a little sour but much wiser, as he sat there thinking to himself, “What if there had been a pumpkin up there, instead of a mango.”

Now there’s a man who will never again put his earthly thinking and understanding ahead of God’s divine wisdom and truth.¹ “Who is wise and understanding among you?” asks James, in today’s New Testament lesson. “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” Just how many lumps do we take in life from the bad decisions we make and the flawed thinking we cling to? Too many, I’m afraid, both as individuals and as a society.

James is concerned that the community he lives in is relying on earthly wisdom to order their lives. He’s concerned they are suffering from choices made – not based on God’s wisdom or will or desires – but based on their own thinking, their own understanding of things, apart from the knowledge and love of God, apart from the teaching of Jesus, with no regard for the Spirit Christ sent to guide us and protect us.

James looked at the community he lived in and saw way too much “bitter envy and selfish ambition” driving their decisions, their words and actions. Now these weren’t ordinary times in the life of the people James was worried about. James looked at the world around him and saw way too much violence, way too much suffering, way too many lies and falsehoods leading the way. He saw the suffering this caused, and he turned to God for wisdom and guidance to overcome it, to turn things back to the good.

Where do we turn for wisdom and guidance amid the struggles we face? Who do we trust in our desire to know what’s true and what’s not. What can we do with our sadness amid the suffering of others, and our longing to make things better? For too many people these days, they truly don’t know where to turn for wisdom and guidance, who to believe when it comes to what’s what, and how to even begin to make things better. We all feel that way from time to time.

¹ Based on Viane Etuale, “God’s wisdom,” You Are Precious in His Sight Web Site, <http://fatherviane.amsamoa.net/20.htm>. Retrieved April 11, 2003.

It's not easy to know where to turn, who to believe and what to do. It's not easy nowadays and it wasn't easy in the days of James. James, in helping the people around him, also helps us. James provides a way for us to test whether we are relying on sound judgment, believing the right things, and doing what we can to be of help and support for others, for those who are suffering.

The first thing James tells us to do is search our hearts so as to not be "be boastful and false to the truth. Such (boastful and false) wisdom," says James, "does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish," leading to "disorder and wickedness of every kind." Well, looking at the disorder and wickedness we see in the world these days, it's clear that James is onto something here, that he has something we can learn from, something we can be guided by.

James says we must guard our hearts against self-righteousness – the belief that we know better than all the rest. And then James gives us a way to tell what's true and what's false, what's helpful and what's hurtful. He says, "... Wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits" Wow, that sentence is jam packed with things to watch for in deciding what to believe and how to act. Let's take them one at a time, very briefly.

First, purity – wisdom and knowledge that is pure. Does what you're hearing and believing come from a reliable source, a pure source? It's hard to know these days, but no less important to as (to search your heart).

Second, peaceable and gentle. Is your life one of peace and gentleness, or are you more often in conflict with others, and especially well-meaning people of good conscience and character?

Third, a willingness to yield. Are we willing to listen to others, examine the facts and change our minds? Or is there nothing anybody could ever say or do that would have us reconsider things.

Finally, says James, divine wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits. Do our words and actions bless the lives of others? Do they advance the health and harmony of our community, of those around us? If not, than that's an indication we might be on the wrong track, might on the wrong side of things.

Look, I know it's not easy to discern what's right and what's wrong. The point is, we have to be willing to try. We have to be willing to look and see if there is any way that we might be part of the problem instead of part of the solution, when it comes to whatever is disrupting our lives, causing pain and grief, tearing down the community, the family rather than building it up. I mean James states it quite clearly when he says, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?"

There are lots of cravings that we have here on earth -lots of desires- that have nothing to do with what's most important in life.

Take for instance, the man who craved wealth and money more than anything else in all the world.

After a lifetime of accumulating money at all costs, the man was very grieved to realize he couldn't take his money with him when he dies. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him. An angel heard his plea and appeared to him, saying, "Sorry, but you can't take your wealth with you." The man begged to speak to God to see if he might bend the rules. Taking pity on the man, God decides he can take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man grabs his largest suitcase and fills it with bars of pure gold and places it beside his bed. That night, he dies and shows up at the gates of heaven. St. Peter greets him, sees the suitcase, and says, "Hold on, you can't bring that in here!" The man explains that he has permission and asks St. Peter to check with God. Sure enough, St. Peter checks and comes back, saying, "You're right. You are allowed one carry-on bag. But I'm supposed to check the contents." So St. Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items this man found too precious to leave behind. Looking at all those bars of gold, St. Peter turns to the man and says, "What?!? You brought pavement." The streets of Heaven are paved in gold.

Yes, James, we have a lot of earthly cravings and desires that we have nothing to do with what's truly important in life, lots of things that pull us one way or the other, lots of pressures pushing in on us. So thank you, James, for giving us a way to check ourselves, to check our thinking, to check our hearts. Thank you for inspiring us to always be checking that our beliefs and actions are pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, and full of mercy and good fruits. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, you are the fountain of all wisdom, the life source from whom we learn all that is good, pure, merciful and compassionate.

Thank you for the example of your Son, who in all things modeled peacemaking, love for others, and the wisdom that comes from walking rightly with you.

Just as people were drawn to him, we draw near to you, wanting to know you, to experience your presence in transforming ways, and to be renewed by your Spirit.

We open ourselves to you. Do your holy work in us, healing us, correcting us, comforting us, and encouraging us.

And may we, as a result, be the incarnation of your presence in our world.

We pray for those who grieve, for those dealing with illness and disease, for the lonely and those in need.

We pray all this in the powerful, inspiring and joyful name of the Lord, as we join together in the prayer that he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.