

Two Tracks of Wisdom

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Who is wise and understanding among you? This is the question that James poses at the beginning of our scripture verse for today. Who is wise and understanding among you? We tend to have a broader understanding of what the word “wise” means as adults than as children. We have a better grasp of how being smart or successful doesn’t always equate with wisdom. We have lived experiences where we know that those who “get ahead” in life and quickly rise up in status or position can also be the ones who are most manipulative, cunning, and self-aggrandizing. We know that just because you have a Ph.D, own a multi-million dollar business, have written more than 30 books, or work at city hall doesn’t necessarily mean you’re wise.

Some, perhaps, would say that it is the clergy and elders in a congregation who are good examples of wisdom; after all, a maturity of faith and wisdom when making decisions that affect the greater church body is certainly something we hope for in these leaders. But I’m here to dispel that idea. In part because I can tell you that being ordained as a minister doesn’t automatically make you wise, but also because this isn’t really what James is trying to get at when he talks about wisdom. Wisdom is less about the position you hold, the power you have, or the authority you wield. Wisdom is far more about your character and the path, the way, or the track that you walk each and every day.

James’ understanding of wisdom involves what is often referred to as “the two ways” tradition. This idea can be found in other ancient Christian texts, as well. The main distinction of “the two ways” tradition is that one way leads to life and is defined by loving God and loving your neighbour. The other way leads to death and is defined by things like cursing, murder, adultery, selfish ambition, idolatry, and a “double heart.”¹ The two ways are seen as starkly opposed to one another, with no middle ground. One track leads to God, the other track away from God. And you cannot be on both tracks at the same time; that would be like walking in two different directions at the same time —impossible.

So, what do “the two ways” have to do with wisdom? Well, James aligns the way of life with heavenly wisdom; moving toward God brings enlightenment and allows us to receive God’s gifts of wisdom. In more biblical terms, it is righteousness. On the other hand, the way of death—an earthly wisdom and movement away from God—is

¹ Achtemeier, Green, Thompson. *Introducing the New Testament*.

associated with foolishness. And that track leads to another word that often crops up in the Bible: wickedness. James entreats us to follow along the track that leads to relationship with God.

We do not move along the tracks alone; we have teachers to guide us, right from birth – often beginning with our parents and expanding to include a wide variety of friends, leaders, mentors, and other influencers—for better or worse—in our lives.

So, who is wise and understanding among you?

Another way of putting this might be to consider who the true teachers and who the false teachers are in your life. True teachers offer wisdom that keeps us on that life-giving path to God. False teachers give us information that may lead us to believe we are doing what is best, but ultimately lands us on the track that moves away from God. How are we to tell the difference? How are we to know if true wisdom is being offered?

According to James, false wisdom—or earthly wisdom—seeks a selfish human end. It is envious and full of selfish ambition and boastful. It is unspiritual, making it earthly in an elemental and devilish way. While true wisdom—or heavenly wisdom—is a godly wisdom that informs our faith and forms our character in ways that make us more like God. Heavenly wisdom seeks faith in God and is peace loving, gentle at all times, humble and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favouritism and is always sincere. What is noteworthy here, too, is what it doesn't ask for: heavenly wisdom does not ask for perfection; it does not ask for smarts; it does not presume that we will be without doubts. Rather, it begins with a holy life and is almost entirely characterized by getting along with others. Heavenly wisdom involves self-discipline, but only as a means to better serve and foster congregations and communities. Who do you know that is like this?

In every form of ministry I've been involved in, I've met wise and understanding people who so very often meet James' description of heavenly wisdom, if not all the time. And they're not always the oldest people. No, the wise have also been teenagers and young adults whose greatest desire is to serve the camp community they are a part of in a truth-telling, life-giving, godly way. The wise have been the leaders who, in my youth I passed off as people with a secondary kind of importance in my life, only to find in my adulthood that the ways they led, the words they used, the actions they took, are still with me and influencing my own style of leadership. The wise have been the ones who know that sometimes the best thing to do is just be present—no words needed.

So, if we are on this track that leads to God, if we are seeking the gift of God's wisdom, then what is it that so easily sets us back? James addresses this when he asks "what causes quarrels and fights among you?" And it's a good question to ask, because when the church is at its best, then we are all working in some way to take that track that leads to God, we are doing all we can to serve one another, and we are planting seeds of heavenly wisdom wherever we go. But we all know that there are times where even in a church, in a congregation of people who want to put God's wisdom to use each day, we can turn around on that track and choose to quarrel and fight. Where disagreement could also be met with gentleness, there instead is disagreement and sharp words, or ignored voices, inflated egos, a desire for hierarchy over equality. And for what purpose? James tells us it is from envy; from a desire to have what you do not have. And that desire becomes so strong that we will become manipulative people. We will kill—perhaps not literally, but killing relationships due to feelings of envy is not unheard of. Neither is killing another's enthusiasm, or sense of safety, or feeling of belonging just to further our own agendas.

We can be very jealous beings. And in that jealousy, in our coveting, in our selfish ambition, we forget which way we're heading and lose sight of heaven and declare that all wisdom comes from within ourselves. Fulfilling our personal desires becomes the primary concern—and the wisdom that satisfies our individual, personal pleasures is not wisdom from God; it is earthly and unspiritual. When we look at our society we see "earthy, unspiritual, devilish" wisdom all around us. Children desire brand name clothing because those who wear that clothing seem popular and happy. Teens want the latest tech toys in order to better communicate and promote themselves 24/7. Adults want the greatest car, the nice house, the impressive job in order to promote a lifestyle that they believe will bring fulfillment. Plus, there are those who seek particular titles for themselves and their families; for instance, the "best provider" or the parent of "genius children" as a measure of self-worth and achievement. It may feel good in the moment, but this, James says, is friendship with the earth over relationship with God. James takes this one step further saying that in befriending the earth, we make an enemy of God. He says we cheat on God; we are adulterers.

Who is wise and understanding among you?

What does God want in all this? As much as we can be a jealous people, so too, is God a jealous God. But God's jealousy is drawn forth when we make friends with the world over and above a relationship with God. As one commentator put it, "God is

yearning and searching for the human spirit that mirrors God's own image.”² That word —mirror—is always an important one when we come across it in biblical readings and contexts. Looking in a mirror and seeing our own physical reflection is one thing, but the word mirror should guide us to go deeper than that—it incites self-reflection. And in that self-reflection, when considering the track we chug along each day, is God's image shining back? The battle is for self-awareness, self-control, and self-mastery; the battle is for heavenly wisdom. God wants us to draw near to God. God wants us to submit to God and, therefore, to a wisdom that values love of God and neighbour over a wisdom that embraces envy and its own self-establishment.

While James emphasizes the two ways, I don't believe this means that God is not present in both. After all, what are we to do on those days when our real life situations, our real life pressures, our real life anxieties get the best of us and we just do not have the patience or the stamina to be peaceable, gentle, humble, merciful, impartial, and genuine? Do we have to be wise at all times? Is it okay if our self-refection reveals a sense of defeat, of unyielding anger or frustration, of envy for what others have that makes their lives appear so much easier? Of course it's okay. I think at these times we all need to play to fool. Because playing the fool is often when we learn the most. Our foolish endeavours can lead us to self-reflection—to reflecting God's own image back onto ourselves—which in turn, makes us more wise.

No matter the track we're on, God travels with us. And so do other wise people. Both are available for us to look to when we need to check our image and adjust who we are travelling toward.

Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

Let us pray.

God of wisdom,

Grant us the courage and the tenacity to seek your heavenly wisdom every day. And when we go astray, give us wise and loving communities ready to take our hand and lead us back to you.

In Christ's name, Amen.

² Barbara Brown Taylor