
Prayers

To God

Pray quietly, confessing your sins and asking the Lord Your God for redemption. As you pray, remember what Christ has done for You on the Cross.

For myself

Weekly theme: doubts

Father Almighty, You see into the hearts of all who struggle with faith and have personal doubts. May we who are Your people be ready to listen to the heartache of those who are troubled in this way. And by the grace of God, may we lead them to a place of greater safety. In our desire to help people, may we not so much tell them what to do and think, but help them to look to You who make sense of all things, Jesus Christ our Lord: **AMEN**

For others

Bless those who are making the news today, especially politicians, sports and media stars and also those members of the public who are unwittingly caught up in great matters

Meditation

The ways of the Lord are compassionate and His love is incomparable;

He focuses the minds of those who need to deal with bad debt,
He liberates those entrapped by life and have no sense of purpose,
He helps with the most difficult decisions taken in the work place,
He re-ignites passion in wounded marriages by nurturing true love,
He heals the hearts of parents and children, shattered by separation,
He gives new vision to those who need to find hope to face the future,
He ministers to the pain of the aged when gripped by chronic illness,
He heals and purifies the spirit of those who know the hell of abuse:

He has faced the toughest pain, the Cross; and His victory is our strength.

Bible Passage

James 3:13-18

¹³ Who amongst you is wise and understanding? Then show by your good life that your works are done with humility born of true wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition within your hearts, do not boast of it or live in such a way as denies the truth. ¹⁵ Such 'wisdom' does not come from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. ¹⁶ For wherever there is envy and selfish ambition, you will also find disorder and all manner of bad practice. ¹⁷ However, heavenly wisdom is first of all pure, then peaceful, gentle, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, and with no partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Review

Moving on from his extraordinary but powerful outburst (3:8-12) about the evil tongue and his warning about *'faith without works'* (2:14f.), James now continues with more measured advice. Looking back over his letter, it seems that James was deeply concerned about what was happening in the churches to which he was writing, in particular that the Gospel was being clouded by inappropriate behaviour. He was especially upset by the preferential treatment of the rich at expense of the poor (2:1-7); he could hear in his ears the mincing words of stewards ushering the rich to their favoured places and pushing the poor to one side as they arrived. This was perhaps just an example of his concern, but as so often with Scripture, the Holy Spirit used this to prompt James to call us to consider some deeper truths about behaviour and speech.

So now, James appeals to his readers to *'show by your good life that your deeds are done with humility born of wisdom'* (3:13). He calls for evidence that true faith in Jesus Christ has changed people's lives, and that sinful deeds have been replaced by *'good ... deeds'*, and *'wisdom'*. Throughout history, God's people have been at their best when they demonstrate to the world both the godly and human qualities of Christ which make for reconciliation and peace in this world. Jesus was a man of humility and strength, of love and honour and of wise and measured speech; His people should therefore emulate their Saviour in every possible way. If God's people will not show the world something of Jesus in through their own behaviour, then the world will not see Him or find God.

James presents his case using 'wisdom', one of the great Old Testament characteristics of God. After he calls on God's people to be wise and make faith known through good deeds (3:13), he appeals to them to understand their failures and do something about them (3:14-16); they are living a 'false' wisdom. But in the last two verses (3:17,18) James describes the true wisdom of God, which results in a *'harvest of righteousness'* (3:18) for the Kingdom. But if we are to understand all this, we must get to know the meaning of 'wisdom' in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, the character of 'wisdom' is found most prominently in the book of Proverbs, and is an important feature of the way children were taught about God in ancient Israel. But while the teaching of 'wisdom' was designed for young people who needed to learn more about God and how to live in His ways, this same teaching stands today as good material for all who want to learn about God and follow Him.

In Scripture, wisdom is presented mostly as a character, who sets before the learner two paths, one bad and one good, just as James does here in this passage. We can find this

throughout the book of Proverbs, as in this quote, which connects closely with what James says here;

'For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding ... so you will understand what is right and just and fair ... a good path. Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, and who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways ...' (Proverbs 2:6-13)

There is a treasury of wisdom literature in the Old Testament, and Jesus develops this theme significantly within His own teaching. These famous words present the idea of two pathways of life, and one of them leads into God's Kingdom;

'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.' (Matt 7:13).

Wisdom is a complex subject, and because of this, some scholars suggest that this letter could not have been written by James, the brother of Jesus, a man from Galilee who was a probably a fisherman. Frankly, I regard this analysis as prejudicial and ill-considered, and not unlike the like the evil behaviour castigated by James earlier (2:1-7). Christian history is littered with example of people of lowly birth who have risen not just to high positions of spiritual authority within the Church but also intellectual greatness; there is no reason why James could not be one of these.

Now we must look at James' comments about the evil pathway and the good pathway. We recognise the evil characteristics he describes because they have a habit of hanging around the church even today; they are the result of careless religion and selfishness. James lists bitterness, envy, ambition and pride (3:14), and adds that they are '*unspiritual*' and '*demonic*'! This is tough talking! Would that we were concerned enough about these same things to make sure we do not demonstrate them, for example, in our church meetings today! Or do we allow each other such things just because we know them from everyday life? James is back and white about this; such bad behaviour is not evidence of people who are saved, but of people who are self-centred, '*unspiritual*' and susceptible to '*bad practice*' (3:16)! These are some of the worst qualities of humanity, and they should not be tolerated in the church!

In contrast to this, James identifies the characteristics and spiritual wisdom of those who put faith into practice. These are, '*humility*' in action (3:13) and being '*pure, peaceful, gentle, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, with no partiality or hypocrisy*' (3:17). It may seem that such characteristics could never produce a powerful and effective leader in the church, but we would be wrong. The whole Gospel appeals to us to accept that true strength does not lie in worldly aggression or force. All too often, our failure to appreciate the spiritual and practical value of the qualities of goodness presented to us in Scripture undermines the church. Christ is our example.

It may be that through regular reading of God's Word, in which lists such as this are common, we will eventually learn the spiritual and practical truths of God's Kingdom. But we should learn one lesson here; the church is not best led by autocratic leaders with their own vision of 'new ways of being church', who equate loyalty to God's church with their own vision of His Kingdom. God has established His Kingdom and He wants us to do its work His way. The parameters for this are set down in Scripture, and He looks for leaders with characteristics like Jesus! Moreover, God will do His work and gain '*a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace*' (3:18).

Discipleship

Application

Wisdom and understanding

The wisest thing we can do after reading such a passage is to accept that all too often, we fail to live up to the high calling of Christ in His Kingdom. Churches look for leaders who they think will deliver church growth, or do everything the church needs to do in a neighbourhood. Leaders look for congregations to be perfect and supporting of their every spiritual leaning. And behind the scenes, church meetings cast a thin veil over anger and anguish, turmoil and upset, normally over the trivia of church life; music, pews, paint, rotas and the like.

The spiritual heart is one that constantly seeks to be like Christ; to so lose itself in Christ that their true identity is found in Him. That is where true liberty and honest identity are found. Not in selfish searching or pursuing personal goals. The Kingdom of God is victorious in the Western world when God's people demonstrate conclusively the folly of worldliness and the inadequacy of strength as we perceive it. This is the Gospel by which those in true need are saved.

Being spiritual and practical

As we have found throughout our studies, true spirituality is profoundly practical, and this is James' point. True faith is shown in what people do and how they behave towards others. When we realise this, we are liberated into a discipleship which pursues the things of God, which relentlessly pursues righteousness, loveliness, goodness, and godliness and all the fruits of the Spirit. It also rejects aggression, envy and all the evils James mentions here in this text, knowing that they point in the opposite direction to Christ. These are our godly markers, and this is our faith.

Ideas for what to do

- Read through Galatians 5 and compare Paul's lists of the fruit of the spirit and the works of the flesh with this passage.
- Discuss with a friend whether 'wisdom' is a useful concept in today's church, or find a practical way to 'make peace' (see 3:18) with someone or something in your life today.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What other qualities of godliness would you add to James' list? What do they add to what James already says?
2. What other qualities of worldliness would you add to James' list? What more do they add to what James already says?
3. How is the Church today to go forward without competing forcefully in the modern world?

Final Prayer

We worship you, Lord God Almighty! We worship you in our words, our deeds, our thinking and our feelings; each of us with all our 'heart, soul, mind and strength'. We give ourselves to You so that Your will might be done on earth, both now and forever: Alleluia! AMEN