

Wisdom From Above

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

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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September 19, 2021/17th Sunday after Pentecost

Friday morning was a more or less normal weekday morning. I was getting ready for work, making my lunch, gathering books, pouring coffee, drifting in and out of the kitchen.

Over at the dining room table, Naomi was embarking on a day-long Zoom meeting. She is a brand-new board member for MMI (thanks, Kevin).

And so, as I was doing all the normal morning things, I was also eavesdropping on an opening devotional being delivered by one of the other MMI board members. These are the strange things that become possible during COVID-time.

The devotional began with the speaker talking about how “not normal” these times we are living in are. This has felt true throughout the last nineteen months, but it felt especially so on Friday.

Two days earlier, the Alberta government had re-introduced sweeping pandemic restrictions in an attempt to address the dire state of affairs in hospitals and our province.

It all felt a little Groundhog Day-ish. *Here we go again.* More masks, more gathering restrictions, more daily staring at rising numbers online, more anxiety about an uncertain future.

Even though we have vaccines, September 2021 feels pretty much like I remember September 2020 feeling. Except angrier.

The devotional continued. “This has polarized us like nothing I can remember...” Who among us would disagree? It’s become a truism by now.

We see and hear and feel this every day. Whether it’s around meeting room tables or online or among family members or in churches, it seems like our collective nerves are frayed. Very few among us are our best selves these days.

And it seems like we are all walking around trying to avoid conversational landmines. We don’t want to say the wrong thing to send a pleasant interaction careening off into a COVID battle. Or

perhaps some are just a little too eager for precisely that! We *want* a chance to convince our neighbour once and for all why we are right, and they are wrong.

The last part of the devotional that I heard as I waved goodbye to Naomi and walked out the door was this. “Everyone has their own version of ‘the truth’ and then we all just live into that...” How true, I thought. How very, very true.

Psychologists have a term for this proclivity of ours: “confirmation bias.” You’ve no doubt heard me refer to this before, but perhaps a brief refresher is in order.

Confirmation bias: the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one’s beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities.

In other words, we are drawn to those views of the world that confirm what we already believe, what we would like to believe.

Confirmation bias was not invented in the twenty-first century. This is and has always been a basic feature of human psychology. But life in the Internet age has surely made it exponentially worse. And life during COVID-time seems like confirmation bias on steroids.

I don’t like the fact that this is how we are wired as human beings. One of the reasons I was drawn to philosophy in university was because I believe that truth is objective. It doesn’t depend upon our preferences. It just *is*.

I still believe that the truth is objective. But we, sadly, are not. We are yanked around by emotion and desire and bias and hopes and fears and all kinds of other primal impulses of which we are often barely even aware. This is who we are.

I don’t know how the MMI devotional coming out of Naomi’s laptop ended. Perhaps the speaker tied everything up in a nice tidy bow, solving all the riddles of truth and objectivity and bias and polarization once and for all.

Or, more likely, not.

I have found myself regularly praying for one thing over the past year and a half (at least).
Wisdom.

I have prayed for it before church meetings where tough decisions have to be made (and made and made again). I have prayed for it before personal interactions that I suspect might venture into difficult territory. I have prayed for it while writing sermons that will be spoken into anxious times.

Wisdom seems to me the most desperately necessary quality we can aspire to in a pandemic, yes, but also in an ordinary world where we never see the truth completely objectively, where we are subject to all kinds of biases that we are only dimly aware of.

Wisdom is not the same as knowledge. Some people who have PhDs are not terribly wise and some people who have little or no formal education are wise in deep and profound ways.

One dictionary defines wisdom like this: “the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment.”

I think this is true. I think that a crucial component of wisdom is also to know how to live well within all the limitations of the human condition and the world in which we find ourselves.

Our passage from James is all about wisdom. Who is wise among you, James asks? Let them show it by their good lives and by humility.

Wisdom, in other words, is shown most clearly in deeds and not just words. This is a theme of the book of James more broadly.

Those who are governed by envy and selfish ambition are the opposite of wise, James says. This “wisdom” is “devilish,” “unspiritual,” or even “demonic,” depending on the translation.

What we are to seek, James says, is “the wisdom from above.” Sounds good. So, what is this “wisdom from above?”

At the centre of our text today is a list. It’s found in chapter 3:17.

I like lists, for the most part. They’re clear, they’re precise, they’re laid out in a format that is easy to understand. And this list is a good one. It sets us on the path to understanding and implementing the wisdom that comes from above.

The wisdom that comes from above is:

- **pure** — I think James is speaking here of purity of intention. We will never be 100% pure, but we can constantly seek to be leaning in the right direction and in the right ways.

The wisdom that comes from above wants to want what God wants for the world and for our own lives.

- **peaceable** — in a world where conflict seems to come so easily and naturally to us, whether it's global warfare or down to the interpersonal level, in a world where we want what we don't have and go to great lengths to get it, in a world where our desires often collide with the desires of others, in an online world that requires and profits from outrage and reactivity... the wisdom that comes from above is peaceable. It seeks peace. It cultivates peace. It embodies peace. It makes peace.
- **gentle** — In a world where the loud and the aggressive, the brutally calculating is so often celebrated in our media and our entertainment... The wisdom that comes from above is unobtrusive. It is tender. It seeks to protect and preserve that which is bruised and broken. It recognizes that nearly every human being is fighting some battle that is not obvious on the surface of things. Even those who don't think like us.
- **willing to yield** — In a world where to not insist upon one's own way is often seen as weakness or cowardice, where we admire those who know what they want and go out and get it (often no matter who has to be sacrificed along the way) ... the wisdom that comes from above is willing to yield. It does not insist upon its own way. It takes Jesus at his word when he says, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." This is not to be confused with a lack of conviction. We can have strong convictions; we can speak out forcefully for what we believe. We can act against the injustices in our world with determination and resolve. But ultimately there is a time and a place where we must all say, "there is only so much I can say and do, and I must trust God with a future that I cannot control." Indeed, it is only a deeply rooted trust in the character and purposes of God that allows us to yield.
- **full of mercy and good fruits** — I am convinced that mercy is one of the most desperately necessary and rare things in our world today. We live in a frenzied moment when it comes to identifying sin and condemning sinners. Transgressions—real or imagined—are dragged up from the past and gleefully seized upon. Righteous condemnation pours forth daily in our news media and social media. But in our haste to pursue our own visions of righteousness, we have almost entirely left behind mercy. The wisdom that comes from above is *full* of mercy and good fruits. Full. This is not mercy apportioned grudgingly. The wisdom that comes from above loves to show mercy. It takes Jesus at his word when he approvingly quotes the prophet Hosea: "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"
- **without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy** — Given what I've said above, this one seems impossible. Haven't I just finished saying that we all have biases? Haven't I gone

to great lengths to say that to be human is to be profoundly limited? All of this is true, but I think what James is saying here is that the wisdom that comes from above refuses to be *deliberately* partial or hypocritical. The wisdom that comes from above acknowledges that these things come naturally to us *and because of this knowledge*, it deliberately seeks to avoid placing the self at the center of all things.

In sum, the wisdom that comes from above looks squarely at the limitations and tendencies that are part of what it means to be finite, fallen, and fragile human beings, and then seeks to live and speak in ways that combat our natural selfishness and create conditions where human beings can flourish together.

In many ways, James' list of what wisdom looks like mirrors another list, this one articulated by Christ himself. Mennonites know it well. It's one of our favourites. It is found in Matthew 5.

Blessed are the...

- poor in spirit...
- those who mourn...
- the meek...
- those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
- the merciful...
- the pure in heart...
- the peacemakers...
- those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Mat. 5:3-10).

Neither James nor Jesus' are celebrating weakness. There is strength in seeking to live in these ways. The wisdom that comes from above, the blessedness that Jesus' speaks about—both are radically countercultural ways of living in the world.

To live in this way is to leave a lot in God's hands. Our reputations. Outcomes. Wrongs that seem to go un-righted.

It will deprive us of the pleasure of piling on to "all those idiots who don't agree with me." I'm sorry to say.

I say this as someone who far too frequently has done precisely this over the last nineteen months. I think that many of us (myself included) often seem to imagine that there is a special brand of fool that Jesus is perfectly fine with us judging. But there are, regrettably, no caveats to the "judge not lest ye be judged" command.

Lives devoted to the wisdom from above simply and persistently proclaim, day in and day out, that “God is God, and I am not.”

I feel like I’ve said this roughly a thousand times over the last nineteen months or so, but here goes again: “We don’t know what the future holds. There is much that is uncertain from our vantage point here on Sunday, September 19, 2021”

This pandemic seems not to be done with us yet. Not by a long shot. And it will require wisdom to negotiate the road ahead in life-giving and redemptive ways.

In our interactions with others, we will need gentleness, mercy, and a willingness to yield. We will need purity of motives and a desire to be peacemakers. We will need to decide in advance that we are opting out of the outrage machine that our media ecosystem has become. This is the only way forward that doesn’t inevitably lead to endless polarization and conflict.

But I get tired of talking about COVID and I’m sure you do, too. We don’t just need wisdom in times of global crisis. Each one of us faces things every day that call forth responses when the way forward seems far from clear.

We need the wisdom that comes from above to know how to live with failing health. We need it as we seek to age well. We need it as we face difficulties at work. We need it as we try to care for those we love who are struggling in various ways. We need it as parents and as children, as spouses and friends.

The world will never stop being complicated. The world will never stop being one in which the best way forward isn’t always obvious.

In such a world, we who follow the Prince of Peace must be those who are seeking always to be cultivating and practicing the wisdom that comes from above.

I want to end with the last two verses of our reading this morning. I don’t tend to like it when the lectionary skips whole sections of the biblical text, but in today’s reading I was glad that the last two verses were added to this reading:

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.

These two verses in many ways sum up what it means to pursue the wisdom that comes from above.

Submit to God. Acknowledge that God is God and that we are not. Trust God for all that we cannot achieve, all that is left undone this side of eternity.

Resist the devil. There are forces in our world, within and without, that lead only to turning us in on ourselves, fueling conflict and division, and generally contributing to settling for far less than the flourishing we were created for. There are things in our world and in our lives that must simply be resisted.

Draw near to God. This is the way to live wisely in a world that will always be in need of wisdom.

And do so in the sure confidence that as you seek this holy path, God will always be drawing near to you.

Amen.

