

Wisdom in James

There is a version of wisdom that we are very comfortable with. It is the wisdom that confirms what we already suspected. The wisdom that shows up right when we needed a good reason to do the thing we had already decided to do. It feels like clarity. It feels like peace. And we call it wisdom because, well, what else would we call it?

James has something to say about that.

We have spent a lot of time in this letter watching James press on the gap between what people profess and how they actually live. He has done it with faith and works. He has done it with the tongue. Now he does it with wisdom. Because it turns out that wisdom is one of the places we are most capable of deceiving ourselves, and James knows it.

So let's spend some time in two passages that sit on either side of this letter. They belong together. James 1:5-8 and James 3:13-18. And together they give us, I think, one of the most searching things James writes.

Here is where he starts. James 1:5.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” James 1:5.

The first thing to notice is the assumption underneath that sentence. James assumes we lack wisdom. He does not say, “If any of you happens to be running a little low on wisdom.” He says: you need this, so go and get it. And the way you get it is not by accumulating enough experience, or reading the right books, or thinking hard enough about your situation. The way you get it is by asking God.

That is a genuinely different claim. James is telling us that wisdom is a gift. It does not originate inside you. It comes from outside you, from above you. And the God who gives it, James says, gives generously and without reproach. There is no hesitation on God's part. There is no disapproval waiting for you when you arrive. God is not grudging with this. He gives to all who ask. That tells us something important about the character of the God James is pointing us toward.

But then comes verse 6. And James adds the condition.

“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” James 1:6

Ask in faith. Don't be double-minded.

We talked about double-mindedness back when we were in chapter one. The Greek word is dipsychos: literally, two-souled.

The person who asks God for wisdom but is already holding their preferred answer behind their back. The person who prays, "Lord, show me what to do," but what they mean is, "Lord, confirm what I have already decided." James says that person will not receive.

Not because God is stingy. But because you cannot receive something you are not actually open to receiving. That is worth sitting with for a moment.

Now James does not leave us only with the question of where wisdom comes from. He also tells us how to recognise it. And that is where chapter 3 opens up.

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." James 3:13

Notice what James reaches for first. Not intelligence. Not confidence. Not the ability to make a compelling argument. He reaches for meekness. The truly wise person, James says, is recognisable by the texture of their life. And the texture he is describing is not aggressive, not self-promoting, not defensive under pressure. It is humble. It is characterised by a kind of gentleness that is not weakness; it is the gentleness of someone who does not need to win.

And then James draws the contrast. Because he knows there is another kind of wisdom in the room. Verse 14.

"But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth." James 3:14

He goes on to name where this wisdom comes from. It is earthly, he says. Unspiritual. Demonic. Three words, each one darker than the last. James does not soften this. He is not describing some minor character flaw. He is describing a counterfeit. A wisdom that looks and feels like wisdom from the inside, that can generate an argument and cite reasons and even claim spiritual motives, but whose source is below, not above.

And its fruit gives it away. Verse 16:

"For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."

James is not being dramatic. He is describing something he has watched happen inside real communities. Whenever someone operates out of that earthly, self-serving impulse, even if they dress it in the language of conviction, even if they call it discernment, the result is the same.

Disorder.

Fracture.

The community does not flourish; it splinters.

So what does the real thing look like?

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”

Seven qualities. And James does not arrange them at random. He starts with purity, which is the root of everything else. To be pure in the sense James means is to have undivided motives. To be actually seeking what is good and true rather than what is convenient or self-serving. Everything else in the list flows from that. When the motive is pure, the person is peaceable. They are gentle rather than combative. They are open to reason, which means they can actually be persuaded; they hold their own view with open hands. They are full of mercy rather than full of conditions. They do not play favourites. And they are sincere, which means there is no performance, no gap between what they show and what they are.

And then verse 18 offers the conclusion:

“And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

Wisdom is recognisable by what it grows. It grows peace. And you do not sow peace by accident; you sow it when you are genuinely operating out of wisdom from above. Now let's bring this close to home, because James does not write abstract theology. He writes for people in real situations.

There are people who are in the middle of a significant decision right now. Something that matters. And they have been “praying about it.” Which is good. But the question James is pressing on is whether the prayer is genuine inquiry or whether it is more like sending God a memo. Lord, here is what I have decided; please confirm. If that is where we are,

James's word to us is plain: you are not actually asking. You are performing asking. And the double-minded person, he says, should not expect to receive anything from God.

There are also people who have mistaken strong conviction for wisdom from above. And I want to be careful here, because conviction can be real and good and necessary. But James gives us a test that is more reliable than our own internal temperature. Wisdom from above produces peace. So the question is: what is this producing? Is it producing peace in you? Is it producing peace in the people around you? Is it pulling the community together or creating division? Strong feelings and settled certainty are not, by themselves, evidence that the voice you are following is wisdom from above.

And there are people who have stopped asking altogether. Not from arrogance, but from fear. Fear that if they actually ask, they might hear something they do not want to hear. To those people, James's word is the most generous thing in this passage: God gives to all generously and without reproach. There is no cost for asking. There is no disapproval waiting. God is not waiting to catch you out. He is waiting to give.

So here is what I want to put to each of us, and I am putting it to myself as well.

Where right now are you trusting your own read of a situation more than you are willing to genuinely put it before God?

And separately: look at the texture of how you are engaging with people around you. Is it marked by what James describes? Purity of motive. A genuine disposition toward peace. Gentleness that does not need to win. Mercy that does not keep score. Or is there something underneath it that, if you are being really candid, is more about self-advancement, or needing to be right, or protecting what you have built?

James gives us a test. Apply it honestly.

The wisdom from above is a gift. It is available. It is given generously, to all who ask, without reproach. But it requires us to actually be open to receiving it. It requires us to come with open hands, not with our minds already made up. That is what it means to ask in faith. And that, James says, is where wisdom from above begins.

I hope and pray that the willingness to ask like that grows in each of us. Not just at the crossroads moments, but in the ordinary texture of how we think and speak and relate to the people around us.

Because that is where wisdom from above does its deepest work.

For Discussion

1. Think of a decision you made that felt like wisdom at the time. Looking back, how would you tell whether it actually was? What fruit did it produce?
2. James says the person who asks with doubt should not expect to receive anything from God. Does that feel harsh to you, or fair? What do you think genuine asking in faith actually looks like in practice?
3. Which of the seven qualities of wisdom from above in James 3:17 do you find hardest to embody, and why?

For Reflection

Where right now are you trusting your own read of a situation more than you are willing to genuinely put it before God?

Is there something in your heart that, if you are being really candid, cares more about self-advancement, or needing to be right, or protecting what you have built, rather than submitting to God's wisdom?