22-28 September 2024 Choosing God, choosing wisdom

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

New International Version

**Two Kinds of Wisdom**

**13**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. **14**But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. **15**Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. **16**For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

**17**But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. **18**Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

**Submit Yourselves to God**

**4**What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? **2**You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. **3**When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures…

**7**Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8**Come near to God and he will come near to you.

 **Bible notes**

The Letter of James is concerned above all else with the life of faith. It is not a doctrinal piece. The writer is concerned that his readers should make good, holy, wholesome choices. Such choices are informed by wisdom, a virtue particularly prized in the Hebrew Scriptures but maybe less so today. In his book Waking up to God, Neil Richardson suggests that ‘wisdom is a blind spot in our economically dominated, globalised culture. Clever, skilled, well-informed people we recognise and value. But a wise person? What might a wise person contribute to the economy?’1.

Typical of James is the emphasis on faith lived out (3:13). It is interesting to note the similarities of the characteristics of wisdom listed by James to the fruits of the Spirit and their opposites, the fruits of the sinful nature that Paul speaks of in Galatians 5. There is another parallel with Paul in 4:1 when James speaks of the ‘cravings that are at war within you’ (cf Romans 7:24-25). So, maybe contrary to what Luther thought (allegedly), James isn’t that different to Paul after all. The wisdom that James writes of is the gift of God, not the achievement of humanity. So, in choosing the way of true wisdom we are essentially choosing God.

 ‘Submit to God’ (4:7) is an unusual New Testament phrase (the only other place it occurs is Hebrews 12:9, NIV; NRSV translates this as ‘subject to’). Usually, the word submit is used of human authorities or interpersonal relationships.

 On the Devil, Michael Townsend2 argues James ‘undoubtedly believed in such a devil, i.e. a spiritual power in opposition to God’. Townsend suggests that ‘Those who find this belief difficult to share, and who prefer to regard the terminology as metaphor for the mystery of human evil, nevertheless need to recognize the emphasis of standing up to such evil’3. Here we have a reminder that wisdom and discernment are close cousins when it comes to making wise, godly choices. We then have comforting and assuring words affirming the faithfulness of God – a key attribute of God that will be both celebrated and questioned across the focus passages in this edition of Roots. There are echoes in these verses of the temptation narratives where Jesus, drawing on the wisdom of the Scriptures, resists the Devil and angels come to attend to him.

The passage ends in a rather blunt and unusual way for James whose normal form of address is brothers or dear friends. The Greek word for sinners, hamartolos, is used for someone who is wilfully disobedient and who positively loves the sinful life. James’ call for change is pretty forthright.

 **Reflection**

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

Choosing wisdom will never be easy and in our media-connected world there are more pressures than ever – for all ages – to conform, follow a trend and adopt a cause. How can we possibly be wise all the time? Sometimes there are no right decisions. In the novel The Shack by William P Young, while Mack saves his son from drowning in the lake, his daughter is abducted from the shoreline: should he have acted differently? A more common dilemma can arise when, for instance, the latest ‘wisdom’ on how to care for a newborn baby is contrary to the advice of a grandparent. What is the source of our wisdom?

Questions for reflection

*You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues arising from this week’s Bible passage.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Hands holding oranges and apples  Description automatically generated |  |

**Questions**

* How do you make good choices?
* Whose wisdom do you respect?
* What good fruit might you see if you act according to God’s wisdom?

##  Prayer

*Adapt to your local context.*

God of blessing and joy, thank you for your gifts,
which are more than we can ask or imagine.
Thank you for the gift of life, which is precious and sacred.
Thank you for the gift of faith, which is a light in the darkness. Thank you for the gift of hope, which is an anchor for the soul. Thank you for the gift of love, which is the greatest of all.
Thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ,
who is our Lord and our friend.
**Amen.**

**A prayer to end the Bible study**

God, may we be great in your eyes
by being humble. *(bow heads)*
Help us to be wise
by following your Word. *(open hands like a book)*
May we be blessed
by being a blessing *(open arms to include others)*
and by choosing you.
**Amen.**