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“Wisdom From Above”

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Do you have clarity for living well? It feels, to me, like a time in history when it's hard to have a lot of clarity for living well. It's interesting to me today, that James is talking about wisdom, because one definition of wisdom is “clarity for living life well”. And it raises the question, “where do we get such wisdom?”, a wisdom for living life well. I am going to suggest that James is going to paint a picture for us of two kinds of wisdom. One, he calls the wisdom from above, and so, I am going to call the other, the wisdom from below. He'll describe it a little differently, but I think that those are the two paintings, or two pictures, or two ways that he wants to describe the two things we turn to when we look for wisdom.

Let's start with the wisdom from below. Wisdom from below suggests that one place to look for wisdom is in the earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. Now, when he begins to describe what he is talking about, the earthly, I think he is talking about what belongs to the human sphere and not to the heavenly. As I looked at the Greek word for unspiritual here, I actually thought that I was going to find the words, not spiritual, but really the word in Greek means, brutish, that is to describe someone who is so cruel and violent that that person seems more like a wild animal. I'm not sure that is fair to wild animals. But you get the point, not belonging to the heavenly but brutish and demonic, which describes a behavior or group of people that are extremely evil or cruel. There is a sphere of human life that attends to our feelings and desires, in a way that suggests that we get these fulfilled through cruelty and violence, and using these to achieve our goals and desires.

I think James goes on and further describes why we might look to that sphere, that there are core motivations, you might say. His description of those seemed to be bitter envy, the way it says it in the scripture, bitter envy, and selfish ambition. The idea of bitterness or malignancy gets at the ugliness of this motivation. I was interested that the word envy doesn't really get into the dynamic of that Greek word. The word means to have overheated feelings of desire for what someone else has. And this is paired with, selfish ambition or rivalry, that these are core motivators for the wisdom from below and it leads to boasting, and lying, and in doing so, based on the words in scripture, it means over exalting one thing at the expense of another, which results in wrong conclusions. Willfully misrepresenting the truth, and truth here is not just that somebody said something that wasn't factual its mis-representing an idea, reality, sincerity, truth, and morals, and perhaps even, the truth that has been revealed by God. It's misrepresenting that encompassing idea of truth and reality. And his misrepresentation feels like humans thinking they know better so that what James is describing is what I call, human hubris. Now let me define that as well, hubris is extreme, or excessive pride, or dangerous over confidence often in combination with, or synonymous with arrogance, which means to feel like one has the right to demand certain attitudes and behaviors from others.

James is painting the picture of what wisdom from below, and how we enter into it due to our core motivations of jealousy and selfishness and the arrogance and actions it causes. We might also attend to Jesus and his two-part story that we get today in Mark. Here he talks to his disciples about

what is going to happen and then what is happening between them. First it is a description how the wisdom from below brings about betrayal. When someone thinks so much more about themselves or their way, that they would betray another to make it happen. And second, the arguing about who is better which is leading to a disintegration in their community. The rivalry about who is the best lead to them arguing and then being silent when Jesus asks them a question. Perhaps, those are outcomes of the wisdom from below James is describing.

But James doesn't leave us there, he doesn't simply describe the wisdom from below, because he claims there is another way. He says, "show by your goodness, by your good life, that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom from above." Where do we get clarity about living life well, does it come from below? Or does it come from above? It's interesting when he talks about showing goodness, a good life, sometimes the words we use don't fully have the color that the scriptural Greek word has. For example, the word good here is not just any old word for good, its not simply the word good. It really means to live in a way that inspires others to embrace what is beautiful and praiseworthy. I think that is a wonderful description of what he is trying to say, and that the word life there is not the word I expected to find, rather it is a word that means one's conduct and behavior, the way one lives. Those make so much sense together. The picture James is painting here is that we can live a life that inspires others through our conduct and behavior, the very way we live. When our works are done with gentleness, with humility born of the wisdom from above, the clarity that comes from above, inspiration is possible.

Here he's beginning to paint that picture of what it means to have that wisdom from above in our lives, and the way our lives will look. He wants to go on and further filling in that painting, wisdom from above is, purer than peaceable, and gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Again, I want to fill those in and continue to paint that picture. That Idea of being pure, I think he is talking about being uncontaminated by the misguided selfishness of the world. And then, peaceable, so often we think about peace or being peaceable as in the following definition I found: "inclined, or disposed to avoid strife and dissension, not argumentative or hostile." So often we describe peace as a lack of conflict, but I think that the peace that is described here, that idea of shalom in scripture, is the idea that we are moving toward a way of harmony that is lived, such that we have healthy relationships that are life-giving to one another. When he is talking about peaceable it is not just the absence of something, he is inviting us into a way that is incline toward harmony.

The word gentle here, is an interesting one because it's so simple to think of this kind of mildness as gentleness, and here the word is one that means, "build on what is the real intent or purpose of what is really at stake". How do we get gentleness out of that? We get that, because when one looks at what's real, and what is really at stake, we're not simply paying attention to the letter of the law, the rules. The idea here, is that one is gentle in the sense of being truly fair, by relaxing the overly strict standards. An interesting word that helps paints that picture of paying attention to the true needs, not just relying on some rules.

Willing to yield, open to changing our minds, open to hearing another's opinions or way of description, and being full of mercy; that idea that we not only want to see how others are faring, or care about when people are hurting, but wanting to do something about it. And then the line from scripture ends, "without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy," describing a behavior free from hidden agendas and selfish motivations and the kinds of distinctions we make to put barriers between us such

that we create “others” whom we may dismiss and treat some as less important. And then, James brings it home by saying, “and a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace in those who make peace.” Getting back to that idea that when we pay attention to the wisdom born from above, when that is the clarity for how we live life well, we will work at creating that harmony that comes about through engaging together in caring ways and will therefore produce a harvest of relationships that are healthy and life giving.

So, as we’ve painted these two pictures it feels to me like what James has done, and what Jesus has shown in some ways, is the result of the two disparate wisdoms, they show us the result in the metaphor of a harvest; the language given us is describing how what seeds we plant matter, whether we are opening our hearts to the wisdom from above or whether we are engaging from the wisdom of below, matters. The choices we make based on the wisdom we look to matter.

I was thinking about this way James is describing the two wisdoms, the two images he has given us, and you know he has done it in pretty stark terms. One is about selfish, fowl fiendishness, and one is about righteousness and peace, and it feels like, who wouldn’t make the choice for righteousness and peace when those are the choices? But he reminds us about how easy it is for our motivations to be about how we want that someone else has, the rivalry with others that we have in our lives, the struggle we have with want to put ourselves first and to get what is best. The very thing that Jesus is pointing out in the disciples, and instead he invites them to see it differently, to become servants. So, when James is giving us these stark images it’s to help us think about in our daily lives, the little things we do, we decide that we are going to cut somebody off, or be gracious to somebody. The ways that we think about putting ourselves first, or how we can instead serve someone else, really matter.

So the image I had of this is, it was a balance. And usually, when we think of a balance we are trying to decide if something is going to work or not, or how much something weighs. But let’s think of this balance a little differently, this balance is attached to doors that open, and which doors open depends on which side, or way, the balance tips.

And so, if we choose the balance that is the wisdom from below, there are certain doors that will open, or if we choose the balance that is the wisdom from above, there are another certain set of doors that will open. And we see the result of that because tipping toward the wisdom from below opens doors of betrayal, the death of God’s son, the disintegration of community, or tipping toward the wisdom from above doors open enabling us to move toward shalom, that place where we begin to recognize what it means to really have the relationships that are healthy and life giving, both with God and with one another. And so, it is such an image that scripture gives us, that our choices matter. And it seems that our choices can be choices of life and death, now, most often that feels to me like it’s figurative; although, the betrayal of Jesus was not. And in this pandemic landscape it’s not always clear that our choices aren’t truly about life and death. And so, we are given a choice, described in these two images, to listen to the world or listen to the wisdom from above? We are indeed invited to listen to our savior, to how James fills in Christ’s way for us, and invites us to give our weight to the side that which is born from above, the wisdom from above, the clarity for living well together, from Christ, from God, for our good. Amen.