

Readings: James 3:30 – 4:3 and 7–8; Mark 9:30–37

“The signs of real wisdom,” says James, “are good deeds and a humble mind.” In other words, if we aim to be wise, we must prove it by living good lives according to God and by doing good without ostentation and with humility.

Put another way, we can’t possibly be wise, if we are proud and selfish. It’s how we live that counts.

That may sound complicated, so James goes on to explain by giving us two quick sketches. First we see

FALSE WISDOM

- *It has no time for God.* James writes: ‘**Such wisdom does not come down from heaven; it belongs to the world, it is unspiritual and demonic.**’ This is the power of the mind that makes clever people into clever devils!
- *It is marked by bad motives.* James writes: ‘**If in your heart you are jealous, bitter, and selfish, don’t sin against the truth by boasting of your wisdom.**’ Some clever remarks are very cutting. They spring from bitterness, and they feed jealousy. This is what we expect to find in the world of politics and the speeches of politicians; but sadly, even in the Church of Jesus Christ, we give in to the temptation to score points off people we disagree with, the temptation to look big in the eyes of people who agree with us. We may win their applause that way, but this kind of false ‘wisdom’ is absolutely nothing to boast about!
- *It has bad effects.* James writes: ‘**Where there is jealousy and selfishness, there is also disorder and every kind of evil.**’ Again, sadly, even in the Church of Jesus Christ, there are always people who are out to cause trouble. They are often very clever people, but they use their clever brains and quick tongues to create disorder. Their opinions carry great weight and most of the votes at Session or Board meetings. But all they do is disrupt, destroy and demolish. They spread unhappiness, disturb relationships and drive people apart from one another. “That,” says James, “is the end-result of false wisdom.”

Then in sharp contrast we come to

TRUE WISDOM

- ***It comes from God.*** James writes: It is **wisdom from above**.
- ***It is marked by good motives.*** James writes: It is **pure first of all** – there is no jealousy or selfishness in it. **It is also peaceful** – all the time it is trying to bring people closer together **...gentle and friendly** – it's ready to make allowances – it's not stubborn or pigheaded, but is always willing to listen. **It is free from prejudice and hypocrisy** – you won't find true wisdom in disguise – it never hides its real aims and intentions.
- ***It has good effects.*** James writes: **It is full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds...And goodness is the harvest that is produced from the seeds the peacemakers plant in peace.** True wisdom is not like a packet of instant mash. It's false wisdom that produces the instant results. The effects of true wisdom may not be quite so dramatic. They may take longer to show themselves. So first, let us sow the seeds of compassion and peace-making. Then let us wait. The crop may take a while to ripen but, if we have sown with true wisdom, we will be rewarded when harvest time comes. Troubled people will thank us for our help. Those at odds with one another will be reconciled and become friends. "It takes real wisdom," says James, "to reap that kind of a harvest." Let us pray that we will keep on reaping that kind of harvest in the North Kirk family

The contrasts are sharp and crisp. It is not always the same in ordinary life. Distinctions can get blurred. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between real wisdom and its imitations. But God goes make the differences clear. False wisdom is utterly self-centred. True wisdom is humble, always putting God and others before self.

This shows itself in prayer. **...when you ask, you do not receive because your motives are bad; you ask for things to use for your own pleasures.** Once again, James has put his finger right on the sore spot. God is no killjoy and he's not anti-pleasure. But he is right against selfishness. He has no time for the Playboy style of living. That makes selfish pleasure the be-all and end-all of life. Good parents do not give way to greedy children. And God never answers selfish prayers.

Once again, the enemy is pride. There are only two effective weapons against it – humility and true wisdom. 'Give me all I want' is a false wisdom prayer. True wisdom prayer is always humble: 'Lord, may your will be done'.

One last question: What does it mean to be humble before God?

In the first place, it means being faithful to him. And secondly, it means putting him in charge. As James writes: **So then, submit to God.**

As usual, James is very practical. He spells out three ways in which our submission to God works out:

1. **Resist the devil, and he will run away from you.** We have an opponent coming at us – and this is war. The devil is out for a kill. Submission to the enemy is out of the question.

Our enemy is strong and cunning and his power is very great. James would not want us to play it down. But if we take a firm stand, we can face him without fear; and if we depend completely on God, he guarantees that we can win all our battles with the devil. So let's stand up to the enemy, and we will see him run.

2. **Come near to God, and he will come near to you.** This is the other side of the coin. When we take a step towards the devil, he runs away. But when we make a move towards God, he comes closer. Jesus told one of his most famous parables to make the same point. The father didn't stop loving his prodigal son when he left home and squandered his share of the family fortune. Nor did he run after him to make him come back. But he was there at the front gate with his arms wide open when his son came back sad and sorry. God is always like that, says James. If we think he is far away from us, it is we who have moved, not him.

3. James reminds us of another home-truth. If we knock on God's door with sin-stained hands, it isn't good enough to say sorry. We have to do something about it. **Wash your hands!**

But clean hands aren't enough. God sees the dirt in our minds and hearts, as well as the stains on our hands. So, **purify your hearts!**

God is a father who wants us, his children, clean inside and out. A quick apology is a cover-up job that will never pass his inspection