

**Text: James 3:13-18**

**Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> February 2020**

**Brightons Parish Church**

**Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.**

**How would you define 'wisdom'? I think it's a lot harder than we first imagine. I suspect that we may come up with a number of possible answers and we could lean towards an answer like the **Cambridge Dictionary**: 'the ability to use your knowledge and experience to make good decisions and judgments.'**

**So, when we read about true and false wisdom in these verses from James, it's easy to get the wrong idea, because 'wisdom' for James is something quite different.**

**Let's also take the word 'peace'.** How would you define 'peace'? Looking again at the **Cambridge Dictionary**, it summarises peace as there being 'no violence' and having 'calm'. But for James, 'peace' is a much richer word, because as a Christian from a Jewish background, saturated in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, he understood both peace and wisdom in a much fuller way, and in a moment we'll get into that.

**Because, in case you're worrying that** this is going to be like a lecture rather than a sermon, here are four pictures of recent events, potentially affected by false wisdom. You may have read about them or heard about them on the TV or radio. We have Kate Forbes, SNP minister; Franklin Graham, American evangelist; Israel Folau, rugby player; and Destiny Church, Edinburgh...

**So, we will get to these situations, because as Christians we need to be aware of them, we need to be aware of what is happening within our society. But before we can engage with the issues appropriately, we need to first understand what James is getting at within these five verses, including the definitions behind his words.**

**We might first wonder though** why James begins writing about wisdom at all, because again it seems like another blunt change of topic. But **remembering this proverb** might help:

**‘The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge,  
but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.’**

**(Proverbs 15:2)**

**We see that the tongue and wisdom are closely linked in the Scriptures, and so for James it's a natural progression to move from our words to speaking about wisdom.**

**He writes in verse 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.'**

**This is the overarching thought for these verses on wisdom. So, what is James saying here?**

**He asserts that someone with wisdom will show humility and good deeds in their life. But again, what does he mean by 'wisdom', or 'humility'?**

**Let's start with wisdom. Wisdom from a biblical perspective is much more than the dictionary definition,**

**much more than an ability to make good decisions and it's much more than pragmatic advice. From a biblical perspective, wisdom has a beginning and a goal, summarised by this verse in Proverbs:**

**'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,  
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.'**

**(Proverbs 9:10)**

**This expression is used 18 times in the book of Proverbs and there is similar language elsewhere in the Scriptures. Wisdom begins by having true reverence, 'fear', of the Lord. It is recognition of who is actually God, that there is a God, that that God is holy and almighty in character and nature. But wisdom is more than just having these ideas in our heads, wisdom includes knowledge and understanding which leads to a changed life...**

**The Scriptures speak in Genesis of Adam knowing Eve, knowing her in a way that changed both their lives forever. So, wisdom includes a knowledge that changes the course of our lives, it includes a reverence that leads to obedience.**

**But biblical wisdom is not only having this awareness of God and responding appropriately to Him, biblical wisdom is also understanding what God is up to in the world and living in response. The Apostle Paul speaks of such in first Corinthians:**

**‘Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.’ (1 Cor. 1:22-24)**

**What Paul is getting at is this: when Jesus was crucified, Jews thought it was weakness, Greeks (or Gentiles) thought it foolishness – for Jews knew that someone crucified was under the curse of God, and Gentiles knew that crucifixion was the most humiliating of deaths reserved for the worst of traitors. Both Jew and Gentile knew, they just knew, that Jesus could not be the promised Messiah, He could not be God in the flesh coming to save the world – or so they thought.**

**But the Church for two thousand years has argued differently: that the Cross was the epitome of God's wisdom and strength, because there He defeated death, there He conquered sin and the enemies of hell. Nevertheless, many Jews and Gentiles could not see what God was up to in Jesus, and so they could not live...**



**in response to God's actions, they could not have wisdom in the biblical sense.**

**James said, '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.'**

**To have wisdom includes reverence for God and an understanding of what God is up to in the world and then living in response. From this, from such true wisdom, comes humility; for wisdom creates a healthy perspective of ourselves before God. We realise that He is God, not ourselves; that the universe does not revolve around us. We realise the gift of life we have been given; we realise also our limitations. We realise how messed up and broken we are, how rebellious we are towards God and yet He still loves us, that He loved us enough to die for us...**

**It's no wonder that this should create humility, leaving no room for pride, no room for selfishness.**

**As a result, through humility created from true wisdom, a way of life should come about that is good and is seen in good deeds.**

**All this, all of this, James captures in one verse and then he springboards into a description of false wisdom and what it leads to. **He writes:****

**'But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.'** (James 3:14-16)

**James speaks of false wisdom, which is empty of humility and so leads to envy and selfish ambition culminating in disorder and a deepening moral crisis. Again here, the words used by James are meaningful.**

**‘Bitter envy’ is a wishing for others to have less, or to be less. ‘Selfish ambition’ is power hungry and status-seeking, so much so, that it leads to feuds, to divisiveness. James wants to highlight for us the perils of selfish individualism, which he says, ‘does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.’**

**Again, meaningful words chosen here. ‘Earthly’, earthbound we might say, such that false wisdom shuts out God and focuses our eyes simply on the present, on the physical.**

**‘Unspiritual’ is used in the Scriptures when human feeling and human reason reign supreme in our lives. False wisdom unseats God from the throne of our hearts; there is no reverence, there is no fear of the Lord, and so false wisdom, unspiritual wisdom, is also ‘demonic’, because it is opposed to God.**

**Unsurprisingly, such false wisdom leads to ‘disorder and every evil practice’. This disorder is not only at the individual level, it is also at the level of communities, even societies. ‘Disorder’ here speaks of commotion, confusion, restlessness. The same root word is translated “uprisings” in Luke 21:9, where Jesus forewarned of restlessness and unsettled global affairs prior to His return, of society increasing in persecution, particularly of the church.**

**So, let me pause here,** and return to those earlier pictures. Kate Forbes; Franklin Graham; Israel Folau; and Destiny Church. I've no idea if you'll have heard of these incidents; but I've been directed to a number of helpful sources which highlight the issues around these four situations.

Kate Forbes, a committed Christian, delivered the Scottish government budget a few weeks' ago at the age of 29, but is now being targeted by members of her own party. **One such SNP member** said of Kate Forbes: "the last thing our party needs is Kate Forbes climbing the ladder when she has such questionable views on equality." As evidence of these "questionable" views, that individual linked to a letter published in The Scotsman last year, authored by fifteen female MSPs,

**who raised concerns over the Scottish government's proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act. AS far as I know, only Kate Forbes seems to have been targeted but she is the one who is a Christian and attends church, and holds an orthodox view of human sexuality.**

**And then there are the cases of Franklin Graham, Israel Folau and Destiny Church and all have a degree of similarity in the issue they face, though there are nuances. Each one in turn has faced censure because they hold and have expressed orthodox Christian views on human sexuality.**

**Franklin Graham was booked to speak at the Hydro Centre in Glasgow as part of a UK tour. The venue is part-owned by Glasgow City Council, and Susan Aitken,...**

**the leader of the local authority, said allowing Graham to go ahead could have broken the law. Franklin Graham has not attacked anyone, he has not spoken any hate crime, but he appears to be penalised for what someone thinks he might say or that his views are simply not in alignment with the current popular position. To some commentators, this would appear to be discrimination based on religious beliefs and it may be that the council have to explain how their decision is not a breach of the Equalities Act.**

**A similar situation arose with Destiny Church, just two weeks' ago, where their annual conference at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh was cancelled because the speakers held to orthodox Christian beliefs on human sexuality.**

**In the situation involving Glasgow City Council, one commentator wrote: 'Ms Aitken is saying that because of**

**‘equality’ someone who holds a view, which is (for the moment) still legal...can be banned on the basis that it would be breaking the law to have him speak. Given that the Catholic church, the Church of England and most evangelical churches hold the view that sex outside marriage is wrong (and marriage is between a man and a woman), does this mean that the churches are against the law?’ The commentator goes on to speak about the ‘intolerance of tolerance’ within our society.**

**In a similar vein,** on an episode of ‘Inside Track’ for BBC5 Live, dated 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020, Martin Bashir, the BBC Religious Editor, spoke about the situation around Israel Folau, and he referred to a **term called ‘totalitolerance’**, which is a worldview which says: “unless you agree with



**every single view that I have and I embrace, I want nothing to do with you and will run you out of town.”**

**Now, I’m aware that we are a mixed group of Christians and will have a range of opinions, but I would hope and affirm that we can all find a place of home here. Yet, in the four situations I’ve outlined, it feels like there’s something not quite right. That instead of having free speech, we may have a form of totalitolerance; that actually, in the name of tolerance we have a form of intolerance. All this brings to mind that famous line, probably **misattributed to Voltaire**: “I may not agree with what you have to say, but I shall defend to the death your right to say it.”**

**It's often been cited in support of free speech because whether we agree with the content or not, free speech is central to democracy, and freedom of speech is only worth something when it affirms the freedom of all people, including the ones we disagree with.**

**So, how does this connect with the writing we have in James today? Well I wonder if what we are seeing in the growing evidence of intolerance, of total intolerance, I wonder if in this we are seeing something of the false wisdom spoken about by James. In that false wisdom, there is 'bitter envy', wherein people wish for others to have less or be less. James also spoke of disorder, of ambition that leads to divisiveness, and of a deepening moral crisis. Don't we see something of this false wisdom in our society and in these situations?**

**I worry that we do, because a life, a society, a community of people who are marked by true wisdom display something quite different, as James makes clear. **He says:****

**‘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. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.’**

**(James: 3:17-18)**

**James says that true wisdom is pure, putting it first to show that it is a prerequisite for the other attributes. By purity, James is referring to an unmixed devotion to God, for the word has the same root as ‘holy’ and ‘hallowed’. A person can also be called pure when they partake of the character of God, when they walk in God’s ways.**

**With such purity, true wisdom, should be humble, it should have an appropriate understanding of self, giving true reverence to God, and as such it is also:**

- Peace-loving: there is unity, at-one-ness, with good close relationships.**
- Considerate – which is a way of grouping together gentleness, patience and kindness.**
- Submissive – or we might say, teachable, willing to yield to the truth of God.**
- Full of mercy and good fruit – such unity, kindness, humility will allow such persons to be conscious of the neediness and helplessness of others so that mercy and good fruit will be seen in practical action.**
- Impartial – that practical action will not show favouritism, as James already highlighted. And finally...**

- **Sincere – because such humble gentleness, seeking after true unity, will not show hypocrisy or pretence, but rather favour only truth.**

**What is striking about all these attributes,** is that they are all seen in God and in His way of relating to us. True wisdom is reflective of God:

- **Peace-loving: God sought peace with us by dying on the cross; He gave His life for peace. (Col. 1:20)**
- **Considerate: Romans 2:4 speaks of the kindness and patience of God which seeks to lead us back into relationship with Himself.**
- **Submissive: Jesus Himself said, ‘I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.’ (Matthew 11:29)**

- **Full of mercy and good fruit: a few weeks ago, we spoke of God's mercy towards us on the cross. (Eph. 2:4)**
- **Impartial: similarly, we also spoke of God's impartiality, that He has no favourites. (Deut. 10:17)**
- **Sincere: as James reminded us, there are no shifting shadows to God. (James 1:17)**

**As such, true wisdom puts to death envy, it eradicates selfish ambition, there would be no disorder, no propagation of base actions with true wisdom, and instead we would see peace and righteousness, which leads to James' conclusion: 'Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.' (James 3:18)**

**The 'peace' that James speaks of is influenced by the Old Testament, where the word 'peace' is known as 'shalom', which is more than the absence of obvious tension. Shalom exists where things are whole, healthy, complete. The experience of shalom is meant to be multi-dimensional, for shalom is well-being physically, psychologically, spiritually and socially.**

**Tim Keller writes, that at a social level, 'shalom would be seen in people sharing resources with each other and working together so that shared public services work, the environment is safe and beautiful, that schools educate, businesses flourish, and poverty and hunger are minimal.' When shalom comes upon a community, even a society, there would be wholeness of relationships, with truth, righteousness and justice evident.**

**Because of such depth to shalom, even just social shalom, James speaks of ‘peacemakers’ rather than ‘peace-keepers’. A peacemaker must confront the problems which need addressed, sometimes disrupting a community (or a society) in order to deal with root problems. Peacemakers are to work peace, tilling the ground, rooting out the weeds and as they do so, from their labour comes a harvest of righteousness, a harvest that is reflective of God and thus true wisdom.**

**So, when voices raise up in our media, or amongst our politicians, or when public venues refuse a platform for voices that they disagree with, does this speak of true wisdom? Does it convey humility, gentleness, an openness to the other even amidst disagreement? Is it impartial and is it being honest about its motives? Personally, I’m not so sure, I’m not so sure...**



**that the intolerance of tolerance, or the totalitolerance that is creeping into society, is true wisdom.**

**Brothers and sisters,** Jesus calls us to be salt and light in the world, shining His light, His true wisdom that all might see more clearly and so find true life. We are also to bear His distinctive flavour, so that like salt, we might bring forth the best in the world, and flavour it with Jesus.

It has to begin first at home; we have to cultivate this in our own lives, in our families, and in our congregation. **James says that such wisdom** is from above, and that God gives wisdom if we but ask for it (James 1:5). So, here's my question: for the sake of yourself, the church and indeed even for society, will we humble ourselves and seek God's wisdom? Will we dig into His Word? Will we ask for His Spirit of wisdom and revelation?

**Because God is ready to give true wisdom, that we might usher in a greater degree of shalom as peacemakers and so be known, as Jesus said in Matthew 5, as the children of God. I pray it may be so. Amen.**