

JAMES 3:13-4:3
WISDOM!

Everyone is looking for wisdom, the key to life that will help us live life in the right kind of way. There is a whole industry dedicated to finding that key, that wise word that will lead to a good and happy and prosperous life. You can have a lifestyle coach: he will have you read the book, or take a course. Here's just one example: "Love life, live life" – 'how to have success and happiness beyond your wildest expectations'; the coach is looking to inspire, empower and motivate you to be best that you can be. If not that particular way, then there is some other way of looking at life and helping you find the secret of a good and prosperous life! There are hundreds of books on the shelves to help you, written by all kinds of people; then you can train to become a lifestyle coach, even gain a diploma! All of this is symptomatic of a deep-seated desire that people have to find the key to healthy living, to being the right kind of people; recognising that there is more to life than material things, money and possessions and that, for some reason, being the right kind of person matters.

The Church is missing a trick here. We have the best lifestyle coach there has ever been, the only One who really understands human life totally and who offers us wisdom about life and how to live, wisdom that remains amongst the most powerful material ever written. Jesus not only teaches us how to live, with words full of wisdom; He shows us how to live and actually invites us to copy Him, to walk in His shoes. The Bible is full of this kind of wisdom and maybe we need to make more of this wisdom; can we tap into this deep-seated longing that people feel? Can we show the world that the Church has something to offer? People are still asking big questions, but for me the disappointing thing is that they don't associate these big lifestyle questions with anything the Church has to say! Some of the most profound and powerful answers to these lifestyle questions come from the Bible; we'll see some today! We're also dealing with these kinds of questions and issues in our Church Wednesday series, on the Beatitudes and Ecclesiastes, which are full of lifestyle wisdom!

"What is life?" There are all kinds of answers to that question. Life is made up of so many different things, it is a complex web of things that it is almost impossible to give an easy and simple answer. Life is about the kind of people we are, what we believe, our relationships with other people, family, friendships, church; life is about the work we do or did, the way we spend our time, our leisure activities; part of life is about possessions, what we own, have and give away; life is about the things we enjoy, the books we read, the TV we watch, the movies we see, what makes us laugh and cry, our emotions, our choices, our decisions. All of that and more makes up the web of life. "Above..." (*Proverbs 4:23*) This is not about having healthy cardiac responses and being physically fit; this is about the heart as the centre of our being, mind, will, emotions, faith, the whole inner being. It is the wellspring of life: the foundation of life begins with the kind of people that we are; we get that right so that everything else will fall into place; everything else fits round that. Augustine a theologian in the Fourth Century writes in his Confessions, speaking to God: "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You." We certainly see something of this restlessness in our world today; there is a God-shaped hole that God can fill deep in our hearts; this is today's wisdom. Perhaps this is way in which Christians and the church can connect with people around us who are looking for wisdom, for the key to life, searching for answers to big questions; let's offer wisdom!

James is one of the most practical letters in the New Testament; the theme is 'wisdom', and it is full of ways in which Christians should live life. It is most likely that James who wrote this letter was a brother of Jesus and the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. He describes himself as a "*Servant...*" (*James 1:1*) There are lots of cross-over themes here with the words of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on Mount, and with the Old Testament proverbs; "how do I live out my faith; how am I to be Christian in the post-modern world?" His readership is scattered across the world: perhaps some of the Christians in Jerusalem had been forced to leave; persecution had perhaps got to them and they are scattered across the world; so James, the pastor for these people, caring for their needs, writes to them so that they may be better equipped to put their faith into practice in their everyday world. Martin Luther described James as a "right strawy epistle"; he saw nothing of substance here, a flimsy letter. In this, he is probably wrong!

There are two kinds of wisdom: wisdom that is from God and "earthly" wisdom. Not everything that calls itself 'wisdom' is wise! There are two kinds of wisdom and we see by their fruits which is which. "*Who is...*" (*James 3:13*) We will look in a moment at a much fuller list of the qualities that wisdom brings to a person's life, but here is an introduction. Wisdom from God produces two fruit: a good life and humility. There is nothing evil about God and Jesus humbled Himself to come into the world, then to suffer and die. These are two key qualities of Jesus, His goodness and His humility and these are the fruits of godly wisdom. But look at the fruit of "earthly" wisdom – "*if you...*" (*James 3:14-16*) There are all kinds of unattractive characteristics; the heart that is out of sorts, the person centred on himself – all of this leads to bitter envy, selfish ambition and "*where you...*" (*3:16*) Life, the world, is out of sorts, troubled, and disordered because it is shaped by envy, jealousy and selfishness. In case we think that this kind of disorder is only to be found in the big world out there, we're reminded sharply that this can infect the Church just as much and even infect our prayers.

James gives us a list of qualities that God-given wisdom produces. First of all it is 'pure'. At the centre of wise living is a pure heart. If you are a goldsmith or some such, your first task is to purify the gold; it comes in chunks of rock, so you have to get rid of all other stuff to be left with pure gold. It is heated, melted, the impurities are skimmed off, till you are left with the metal that is pure gold, unmixed, uncontaminated, 24 carat gold! The key to wise living starts with the heart, starts with a wholehearted love for God, a love for God that is undivided. God is the centre of our life. This stands in contrast to much of the lifestyle coaching today which puts 'me' at the centre of my life and I'm the source of all my strength. The Bible puts God at the centre of life and He is the source of life in all its fullness. This is not about being religious or coming to Church; this is about a heart that loves God with an undying love, with an undivided love; it is about the kind of people that we are.

Secondly, James talks about our qualities in relationship with others: "*then peace-loving...*" (*3:17b*) Sometimes life would be so easy if it wasn't lived with other people; or so we think! Relationships so often shape our life. It is certainly true in the Church. We come to Church on Sunday and appear to be a collection of individuals who just happen to be in the same place at the same time to worship and pray. The reality is that we are the family of God who belong together and who share life as a community of faith, who share a common life together. So we are to be peace-loving: to preserve peace where it exists and to create peace where it doesn't. Every Church leader makes a promise to seek the unity and peace of the Church and nothing that we do should undermine that. Yet churches are full of people rocking the boat and sometimes deliberately so, forming

their own little huddles and cliques that disrupt that sense of peace and harmony. It is simply not wise!

“Considerate...” (3:17) How do we speak to one another? James has spent a long time on words and taming the tongue! I have known lots of people who have spoken first and then thought afterwards! Are our words considerate of other people? “How will the other person feel if I say this to them? Even if the criticism is ‘constructive’ – am I saying this for my own benefit, to get it off my chest? Am I truly considerate of other people?” Even more of a challenge is to be submissive to the needs of others: there is an instinct in us that wants to get our own way and make ourselves heard; our voice is the loudest, the strongest, the last. But Jesus humbled Himself, Jesus served; Jesus submitted Himself to the needs of others and so should we. Bible-wise people submit to the needs of others and care more about what other people need than what we want for ourselves. *“Full of mercy”* takes us into the realms of forgiveness to others, patience, kindness, and generosity. God-given wisdom is so often seen in our relationships with other people, in the way that we relate, in the way Christians behave towards one another and the kind of community life that Churches have.

Finally, God-given wisdom is seen in the kind of people we are as we look at ourselves – *“Impartial and sincere”*. We are sound people through and through. We treat everyone in the same way; we have no favourites and no prejudices. We are sincere, ‘what you see is what you get’ kind of people. Some think that the origin of the word ‘sincere’ means without wax: when the Roman stonemason was making a sculpture, if he made a mistake he would make the repair using coloured wax; it was hidden, but there would be a defect in the statue. So the best sculptures came to be known for being ‘without wax’, *sine cera*, hence our word sincere. What we seem on the outside is what we really are. For most of us in this, I suspect, we are a work in progress!

Wisdom is seen in our attitude to God, in our relationships with other people, in the kind of people that we are. Qualities, qualities, this is all about qualities. The Church at its best is about nurturing people, building people up in our faith and in our Christian lifestyle, in being the right kind of people. Wise people love God with an undivided heart, with a love that never dies. Wise people promote peace: in churches, in communities, across the world, promoting and preserving peace, and are considerate, submissive people. Wise people treat everyone equally and what you see is what you get, impartial and sincere.

You will not find a better key to life anywhere. For the all advice of your lifestyle coach, it will never be quite the same. Your lifestyle coach wants you to have a happy and prosperous life, because you have a right to happy and prosperous life! A life that pleases God – that’s what the Bible wants; our best fulfilment in life is to please God, to be the kind of people God wants us to be and to please Him. There is a restlessness about our world; “let’s try the next thing to see if that settles us down”. The Gospel has always told us that life in all its fullness comes from Jesus; we are made to love God and for faith and for relationship with God and with one another. Be wise!