**Who is wise and knowledgeable among you?**

**恁中間是誰有智慧見識的啊？**

James 3: 13-4:8 9/22/2024

 Grace Rohrer

Prayer:

O Lord, my rock and my redeemer, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be acceptable in Your sight.

Last week, we spoke about the tongue, the author of James shocked readers with the hazards of the tongue. The tongue is dangerous and untamable。It could be good, productive speech, or blessings, and bad, evil speech, or curses (3:1–12).

Despite the strong rhetoric about the fiery tongue, itself set ablaze by Gehenna (a place of punishment) and spreading into large forest fires, the author initially appears to offer little in the way of methods for taming the tongue’s wildness. The present passage provides a way forward. It depends on whether we have wisdom.

Our world today faces many challenges, with confusion and chaos all around, extreme polarization in politics, and ideologies that define people's values. When everyone thinks their opinion is the right one, their method the right way, it’s like Frank Sinatra’s lyrics: "I Did It My Way."

Amidst the many controversies and the noise of clashing voices, wisdom is not welcomed. James, in his soft voice, calls for the wise to stand up and take responsibility in the midst of the crowd. James asks, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" (3:13).

In a world and time full of strange happenings, we truly need to listen. Unfortunately, our society does not value wisdom. Wisdom does not come with technological upgrades or new versions to keep it up to date with the times. Wisdom is as old as God Himself, like last week’s passage from Proverbs, which says: personified "Wisdom cries out in the streets; she raises her voice in the public squares. At the noisy street corners she shouts; at the city gates she makes her speech." James calls out for wisdom.

However, other noisy voices shut out wisdom and drown her voice. People reject her counsel and do not listen to her. In the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, particularly in Proverbs 8, it tells us that wisdom and God co-created as a divine council. We ignore this and consider it unimportant. In James' view, there is a kind of wisdom that always seeks to compete with God's wisdom. James takes a dualistic view of wisdom.

The first type is called human wisdom, or "wisdom from below." If you want to feel good about yourself and boast about your achievements, you may not want to read the Book of James. Some might see James as a pessimist, only seeing the empty part of a half-full glass. Still, James raises an important point: human wisdom, at its core, is about everyone doing what they think is right based on their own standards and interests. Wisdom from below stems from oneself. In reality, this is a misunderstanding of wisdom because it is rooted in jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, and chaos. James gives a dismal portrayal of this distorted wisdom—a pitiful picture.

Wisdom from below looks seeking guidance and wisdom only for its own interests. For instance, think of a dog chewing on a bone that crosses a bridge and sees another dog below. The bone below seems larger, so it drops its own bone and jumps into the stream to grab the bigger one. But in the end, the dog is disappointed, as the larger bone and its owner were just reflections in the water. So, the dog ends up with nothing. Greed and selfish ambition ultimately leave you empty-handed. Human wisdom, based on selfishness, leads people to their own ruin. According to James, wisdom from below will destroy you; it will distance you from God, and separation from God is the spark of a chaotic life.

This wisdom comes from below. James calls it "earthly, unspiritual, and demonic, and its fruits are envy, selfishness, and conflict, leading to disorder and every kind of evil” (3:14). James is clear that this is driven by personal selfish ambition, desires, and the craving to satisfy one’s own pleasures. If a person's life plan primarily focuses on fulfilling their own pleasure, it’s problematic and needs addressing. This is first understanding in James' dual understanding,

On the other hand "wisdom from above" offers another choice—a wisdom that directs us toward God. James previously mentioned that if we ask for wisdom, God will give it generously. When James asks, "Who among you is wise?" (3:13), he points us to seek wisdom beyond ourselves. He encourages us to look up to God, to aim higher, urging us to "draw near to God" (4:8).

This continues the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible, where Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." He wants us to turn our eyes from ourselves toward the One who is higher than all. God is not only the source of all blessings but also the fountain of wisdom. Wisdom from above comes from the eternal, invisible God, the only one who is wisdom itself. True wisdom from above is pure, peace-loving, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere (3:17). Such wisdom can only come from God. Who among you is wise? We know God is wise—are you?

Some Christians consume the Bible as if it were a daily meal, able to quote scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. I know many people can recite the Apostles’ Creed by heart, but does that mean they possess wisdom? Who among you is truly wise? Churches have spiritually devout people, saints, and sinners, but what our church truly needs is more people filled with wisdom.

James highlights an important point: we cannot merely view wisdom as an intellectual exercise. He encourages us to seek wisdom and to demonstrate it concretely through our lives. The wisdom from above should be shown by our good deeds, it is about fear God and connect with God, carried out with the gentleness born of wisdom. That’s why he says, "Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (3:13).

Wisdom takes action. The wisdom James teaches is aligned with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, which links wisdom with practical, good deeds—it’s not just about thinking or reflection. According to Cambridge theologian David Ford, Christian wisdom is about "living wisely before God." Wisdom is a way of life, a way of thinking and existing in the world, based on what we know of God's light, living in that light. Its foundation lies in a thought and action integrated with the all-knowing, all-loving God.

We might even consider theology as wisdom—a "practice and habit of knowledge aimed at salvation," as theologian Edward Farley puts it. Theology is the act of living in the world, adorned, enriched, and practiced through our knowledge of God. When we see theology as wisdom or a form of knowledge, it involves not only a correct understanding of God but also living in connection with this knowledge. It emphasizes living a holy life for a holy God, expressed through love and made possible by God's grace. Theologian Ellen Charry calls this "sapiential theology", wisdom theology.

James doesn’t use these theological terms, but he teaches the same lesson. Who wants to be wise? Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Wisdom is found in the connection with God through love. God is not an object to be studied or analyzed but a living being to be loved, the One who loves us. Let us not only seek to know God but also recognize that God is wisdom itself. Through our encounter with God, we are transformed by divine love, enabling us to live wisely in this world. This involves not merely intellectual understanding or agreement but an intimate relationship, like the pulse of our breath—*ruach*, the Hebrew word for spirit or breath—existing relationally with God in such a close and dependent way. Through this connection with God, wisdom flows from above, taking root and bearing fruit through the depth of personal knowledge and commitment, manifesting in the way we live out wisdom in the world.

With our minds and hearts, let us yearn for God. Who among you is wise? Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

The psalmist praises the God who created heaven and earth, for the trustworthy God delivers Israel and our lives like a bird escaping the fowler’s snare. The Psalms were written for the people to sing, as each generation must learn how to survive in a world beyond their control. The psalmist knows that we often must learn wisdom through the difficult experiences that allow us to survive. God's people choose to trust Him, and even when faced with great threats, they continue to thrive.

In the Gospels, the disciples ask Jesus about those who are casting out demons in His name but are not part of their group. How should they respond to such people? Jesus replies, "Do not stop them, for whoever is not against us is for us." This teaches us a valuable lesson: we should not be self-righteous, thinking we can control or lead every group or community. We must respect others who serve love and truth, even if they do not use God's name or directly relate to us. They may live out wisdom and courage. We are called to trust God and trust each other. As we trust God, others may also learn to trust us.

Wherever we are, may we have the courage to follow God’s call, to discern God’s purpose and plan in our daily lives. We may wish for God to act directly, through miraculous intervention, but most of the time, we do not see this. Most of the time, we cannot see God’s work. However, if we look and listen with our hearts, we may still experience God’s action in our lives.

When we partake in Communion, we draw near to God. We see the bread and the cup, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The wisdom of God makes the wisdom of the world seem foolish. The call of wisdom come from the cross, through the body and blood of Christ, and through divine wisdom. In 2005, Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple and Pixar Animation Studios, concluded his commencement speech at Stanford University by saying, "Stay hungry. Stay foolish." We might say instead, "The hungry, come here. The foolish, come here." When we seek wisdom, we seek God, for when we participate in Communion, which many consider foolish, we express our hunger for wisdom.

Let us pray, "Lord, You are in my heart. You are my wisdom and my truth. You are with me, and I am with You." Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Who among us is wise? There is One among us—our Savior, the only wise God, to whom be glory, majesty, dominion, and power, both now and forever. Amen (Jude 1:25).