

Wisdom from Above

Prayer: *Holy God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Guide us as we read from James, Matthew, and Proverbs. Today and always, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

This is our third Sunday reading from James. In his letter, James challenges followers of Jesus on how they should live, covering topics such as speech, favoritism, love, wealth, and hardship. When believers listen to and obey God’s word, they show their love for God and for others. Their actions match their words. The goal is to live lives of wholeness and integrity rather than lives that are fractured and inconsistent. James often draws from the book of Proverbs and from the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount.

In the section we read today, James contrasts true or good wisdom – wisdom from above – with false or bad wisdom – wisdom from the earth.¹ Godly wisdom from above centers on gentleness in word and action. It’s peaceable, merciful, impartial, and sincere. It’s willing to yield to others. It bears good fruit. Earthly wisdom centers on self-serving ambition, disorder, and wickedness. It is envious. It bears bad fruit. Earthly wisdom leads to division and discord. True wisdom leads to peace and reconciliation.

Those seeking Godly wisdom are the ones Jesus mentions at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. Most translations of these verses use the word “blessed.” The one I’m reading uses the word “joyful.” Perhaps we could also use the word “wise” to begin each sentence.

Joyful [and wise] are those who are poor and humble before God, for theirs is the reign of God.

Joyful [and wise] are those who are deeply saddened to the point of action, for they will be comforted.

Joyful [and wise] are those whose wills are surrendered to God, for they will inherit the earth.

Joyful [and wise] are those who hunger and thirst for restorative justice, for they will be filled.

Joyful [and wise] are those who practice compassion in action, for they will receive God's compassion.

Joyful [and wise] are those who seek God's will in all that they are and do, for they will see God.

Joyful [and wise] are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Joyful [and wise] are those who suffer because of restorative justice, for theirs is the reign of God.

Joyful [and wise] are you when they criticize, persecute, and slander you, because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in God. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you.²

In his letter, James demonstrates how the false, earthly wisdom that comes from self-serving ambition and envy leads to conflict and division. According to James, earthly wisdom may promise the good life, but it leads to chaos and destruction. *Where do you think your fighting and endless conflict come from? Don't you think that they originate in the constant pursuit of gratification that rages inside each of you like an uncontrolled militia? You crave something that you do not possess, so you murder to get it. You desire the things you cannot earn, so you sue others and fight for what you want. You do not have because you have chosen not to ask. And when you do ask, you still do not get what you want because your motives are all wrong—because you continually focus on self-indulgence.³*

I thought of the words of James as I read a blurb in the latest edition of Anabaptist World. Titled *Post-COVID peace in a house divided*, it says:

The pandemic's biggest negative impact on the church did not come from outside forces but internal conflict, writes Phil Gunther, director of ministry for the Saskatchewan Conference of Mennonite Brethren

¹ The commentary on James draws from Pulpit Fiction Podcast for Proper 20B (OT 25), [Proper 20B \(OT 25\) — Pulpit Fiction](#)

² Matthew 5:3-12 as translated by Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*, Jossey-Bass, 2006, pp. 38-39.

³ James 4:1-3, *The Voice*

Churches in MB Herald. When divergent factions anchored themselves to beliefs about COVID-19, pastors and lay leaders who weren't prepared to be peacemakers bore the collateral damage.

*"It was truly heart-wrenching to witness how quickly the battle lines were drawn, grace tossed and mission and love trumped for the sake of rights and being right," he says. "In my tenure as an MB pastor and conference minister, rarely have I seen a greater need for peace and reconciliation within our own house."*⁴

Ultimately, James teaches, true wisdom comes from God, so focus on God. Come close to the one true God and God will draw close to you. In fact, God is already close to you. In the original Greek language, verse 8 of chapter 4 isn't a conditional clause. It's not one of the "if, then" clauses which are very popular in Greek. A more accurate way to phrase it might be, draw near to God who is already drawing near to you. James' focus is to be whole-hearted in one's faith and devotion to God. Focus your words, actions and faith on the task of loving God, others, and self. Be sincere. Be genuine. Be mindful. Be complete. Seek godly wisdom from above. This is what James is talking about when he instructs his readers to be perfect and to humble themselves before God.

As we seek godly wisdom from above, it may be helpful to refer to the book of Proverbs.⁵ Recall that according to the prologue of the book, the proverbs were collected for the gaining of wisdom and the fear of the Lord. Wisdom is more than an accumulation of knowledge. Wisdom involves skill, the ability to apply knowledge to everyday situations. The fear of the Lord refers to a healthy sense of awe for God and an acknowledgment of our human place in the world. These proverbs, then, are to be used to develop practical skills. They are a guide for living well in God's world, something James focuses on too.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs contain ten speeches from a father to a son about how he should listen to wisdom and cultivate the fear of the Lord in order to live a life of virtue, integrity, and generosity which will result in success and peace. The father warns his son about folly and evil and stupid decisions which will breed selfishness and pride and result in ruin and shame.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs also contain four poems of Lady Wisdom. Here wisdom is personified as a woman who calls out to humanity to pay attention and seek her. According to Proverbs, whenever you see people being generous, upholding justice, and living lives of integrity, they are listening to Lady Wisdom; they are drawing on the wisdom from above.

The next 20 chapters of the book contain hundreds of ancient, mostly two-line proverbs about a wide variety of topics. I've quoted lots of them on the last two Sundays. Remember, though, that the proverbs deal in probabilities. If you honor God and heed their advice, it's likely that things will go great. If you do not honor God and don't heed their advice, it's likely that things will go poorly. However, proverbs aren't promises. There are no guarantees. The proverbs focus on the general rule, not the exceptions.

The last two chapters of Proverbs are two large collections of poems. Chapter 30 contains poems by a man named Agur who acknowledges his own ignorance and folly and then discovers that God's wisdom has been given to him in the scriptures which teach him how to live well. Agur is held up as a model reader of Proverbs, somebody who is always open to hearing God's wisdom through the scriptures.

Proverbs 31 is connected to a man named Lemuel, a non-Israelite king who passes on the wisdom given to him by his mother. She provides guidance for being a wise and just leader. She ends with a poem about a woman of noble character. This final poem is quite familiar to many people. Let's read it from the *Common English Bible*.

¹⁰ *A competent wife, how does one find her?*

Her value is far above pearls.

¹¹ *Her husband entrusts his heart to her,
and with her he will have all he needs.*

¹² *She brings him good and not trouble
all the days of her life.*

¹³ *She seeks out wool and flax;
she works joyfully with her hands.*

⁴ "Post-COVID peace in a house divided," *Anabaptist World*, September 17, 2021, p. 5, <https://anabaptistworld.org/>

⁵ Background on Proverbs comes from The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/proverbs/>

- 14 She is like a fleet of merchant ships,
bringing food from a distance.*
- 15 She gets up while it is still night,
providing food for her household,
even some for her female servants.*
- 16 She surveys a field and acquires it;
from her own resources, she plants a vineyard.*
- 17 She works energetically;
her arms are powerful.*
- 18 She realizes that her trading is successful;
she doesn't put out her lamp at night.*
- 19 She puts her hands to the spindle;
her palms grasp the whorl.*
- 20 She reaches out to the needy;
she stretches out her hands to the poor.*
- 21 She doesn't fear for her household when it snows,
because they are all dressed in warm clothes.*
- 22 She makes bedspreads for herself;
fine linen and purple are her clothing.*
- 23 Her husband is known in the city gates
when he sits with the elders of the land.*
- 24 She makes garments and sells them;
she supplies sashes to traders.*
- 25 Strength and honor are her clothing;
she is confident about the future.*
- 26 Her mouth is full of wisdom;
kindly teaching is on her tongue.*
- 27 She is vigilant over the activities of her household;
she doesn't eat the food of laziness.*
- 28 Her children bless her;
her husband praises her:*
- 29 "Many women act competently,
but you surpass them all!"*
- 30 Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*
- 31 Let her share in the results of her work;
let her deeds praise her in the city gates.⁶*

In sermons, studies, and books, this passage is often used as a prescription for what women must do in order to live up to God's expectations for faithfulness. At their best, these comments on the Proverbs 31 woman might be intended as a way to honor women. At their worst, they are used to tell women how to act and to keep them in their place. In either case, they can end up discouraging women as another impossible standard by which to mark their shortcomings.

A blog post by the late Rachel Held Evans is helpful in finding a more accurate interpretation of this poem. She begins by stating that too often, we focus on the Proverbs 31 Woman's roles as a way of reducing womanhood to marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, when really, this passage is about character that transcends both gender and circumstance. In the post, Rachel lists three things the reader might not know about Proverbs 31.⁷

⁶ Proverbs 31:10-31, *Common English Bible*

⁷ <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/3-things-you-might-not-know-about-proverbs-31>

First, the poem found in the last section of the final chapter of Proverbs is an acrostic. The first word of each verse begins with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet in succession. This communicates a sense of totality as the poet praises the everyday achievements of an upper-class Jewish wife, a woman who keeps her household functioning day and night by buying, trading, investing, planting, sewing, spindling, managing servants, extending charity, providing food for the family, and preparing for each season.

The subject of the poem, the “competent, capable, excellent wife,” the “virtuous, valiant, worthy woman,” is meant to be a model of the book’s celebrated virtue of wisdom. The author is showing us what wisdom looks like in action.

The second thing someone might not know about Proverbs 31 is that its target audience is men, not women. In the Jewish culture, it’s not the women who memorize Proverbs 31, but the men. They memorize it to sing as a song of praise to the women in their lives. Using these verses as a task list for a woman to complete in order to earn praise is a misuse of this poem designed as a song through which someone offers praise to a woman in their lives.

The third thing someone might not know about this passage is that Proverbs 31 celebrates valor. The first line of the poem is translated in many different ways. Rather than “a virtuous woman who can find?” or “a capable wife who can find?”, the best translation might be “a woman of valor who can find?” Valor isn’t about what you do, but how you do it. If you are a stay-at-home parent, be a stay-at-home parent of valor. If you are a teacher, be a teacher of valor. If you are a CEO, a pastor, or a service worker, if you are rich or poor, single or married—do it all with valor.

This poem depicts a woman who lives according to the wisdom of Proverbs. It stands as a model of someone who takes God’s wisdom and then translates it into practical decisions and everyday life – at work or at home, in their family and in their community. All people of faith – no matter their gender – are called to follow this example. According to Proverbs 31, faithfulness to God includes trustworthiness, careful and persistent work, attention to the needs of others, good stewardship of resources, care for the poor, preparation for bad times, telling others about God, thinking before speaking, speaking with kindness, working intentionally for the goodness of God and community, and standing in awe of God.

I imagine James had these qualities in mind as he wrote about the wisdom from above and how to live it out in the current world and real-life relationships. When I consider the people in this congregation, I see many of these qualities being expressed – certainly not every single one every single day, but often enough and in great enough quantity that I know we are trying to live well in God’s world with whole-hearted devotion to Jesus.

While it’s not difficult to observe self-serving ambition, disorder, envy, conflict, and division within and around us, it’s also apparent that the true wisdom that leads to peace and reconciliation is present in our community and beyond as well. Proverbs and James agree, whenever you see people being generous, upholding justice, and living lives of integrity, they are listening to Lady Wisdom; they are drawing on the wisdom from above. May this be the case for us.