

# **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle**

**WHERE DOES WISDOM COME FROM?**

**15th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)**

**James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a**

**Analysis by Carolyn Schneider**

3:13Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.16For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. 4:1Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. 7Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: The Wisdom that Does Not Come from God**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Conflicts and Disputes*

As we read through the book of James we watch (and perhaps identify with) the community of poor Christians to whom this work is addressed. They are a minority both because they live in poverty surrounded by wealth and because their commitment to Jesus is not shared by their powerful neighbors. They are beleaguered and oppressed. But we don't see them supporting one another. Instead, we get the picture of a group of people that fawn over the very ones who oppress them, the rich, while they argue and fight among themselves.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Passions for Waging War, Just or Not*

As James pursues the problem to its source in the human heart, he reveals that it is all about power. In this case, those who don't have it want it, even if it is just the smidgeon of power they can feel by besting their equally poor Christian brother or sister in a fight. Or perhaps their bitterness was born out of a less individualistic and loftier goal: If you are right and you know it, you should be in central command. No doubt it was just as frustrating then as it is now for a group to live under the domination of those whom they believed were wrong. To reverse these roles becomes the goal, while Jesus' love for the least was sidelined.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *God as the Opponent*

But James points out that there is wisdom and there is wisdom. Which wisdom reigns will become evident from the actions of the group. Wisdom that erupts in violence and oppression is not from God. James attributes it to the world, the self, and the demons. Take your pick. In any case, it is opposed to God, no matter how righteous it seems to its holders. In fact, its content might

truly be excellent, but James says that no mind. If wisdom (no matter how good it is) becomes a means of standing on the neighbor's back to elevate oneself, then God is stepped on. James warns that those who ask God for control over others will get no response to their prayers because God chooses to remain just as opposed to them as God is to the current oppressors.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Wisdom that Comes from God**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – God as Gentle Wisdom Personified**

God does come near to both oppressed and oppressor, but not as the god who grants dominion. Rather, he comes as a human child for them to fall in love with and embrace. Jesus was himself the personification of the second kind of wisdom that James describes: pure, peaceful, kind, open-minded, full of mercy, not discriminatory or hypocritical. Although this wisdom came “from above” he did not admire or covet the rank of oppressor. He was poor, too, and persecuted. But he never sought to escape it by pulling his divine rank on anyone. All the way through his death and resurrection his wisdom remained the wisdom of God's Spirit, yielding the fruits of love to lift others up with him. It is as if Jesus' fruitful actions burst open with the tomb so that the Holy Spirit could collect the seeds of righteousness from them and plant those seeds in the hearts of others.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Passions for Sowing Righteousness in Peace**

To welcome such a God is to be both humbled and exalted. It humbles because it gives no leverage over others, and accepts the sovereignty of Jesus. It exalts because it takes away any need for leverage over others, and glories in Jesus' rule. If you know that in Jesus God raises you from every kind of death that you could experience, then what is there to fear? The community is freed from the paralysis of frustration and

bitterness. It is freed for the enormous life-transforming risks of living in purity, making peace, practicing kindness, being open-minded, showing mercy, not discriminating and not hiding in hypocrisy. Each one of these alone, if practiced, would have far-reaching, though unpredictable, consequences. A church I passed once in New York City expressed it well on a sign out front: "You are not called to succeed. You are called to be faithful."

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Support and Resistance***

For James, faithfulness always entails the kind of good works that the Holy Spirit is busy with. While faithfulness does not entail gaining control over others, it does entail expressing to the fullest extent possible the "gentleness born of wisdom" in one's own community. If you are not a devil to your brothers and sisters, who have enough to struggle with in the world and themselves without having to struggle with you, too, then the devil has really fled. What can the power of evil do when the power of God is so close to the ground already that it can't be undermined?