

Blessed are the Peacemakers

James 3:13-4:3

13 March 2022 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How do you know if you are wise?

Big Idea: You know you are wise if you are a peacemaker.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Master, Your Word is sweet and life-giving. As we hear it and have it explained today, please use your word to examine us, search us, and warn us. We yearn for you to give us wisdom so that we might live faithfully for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Introduction

Over the last two weeks, in between the devastation we've seen in our own country, I'm sure we've all seen what's been unfolding in Ukraine.

Countless civilians have been killed and even more have had their lives upturned.

There's been suffering that honestly, I struggle to imagine.

People are putting their own spin on it and calling it different things, but it's clear that Ukraine is at war with Russia.

I keep hearing the same question, "Why?"

We want to know why anyone would want a war when it's cost the Russian people dearly and the Ukrainians even more.

Surely everyone would prefer that there was peace?

Let me say up-front that I'm no expert in this area.

Is Putin just crazy? Well, maybe.

You've got Europe on one side and Russia on the other, with Ukraine in the middle.

I haven't read deeply enough to know all the ins and outs and the reasons for this war seem to go back decades, if not centuries, with Russian and Ukrainian history tightly intertwined.

What seems clear to me, though, is that this war – like all wars – is driven by beliefs.

I know this is very simplistic, but the majority of the nation want to side with Europe but a significant minority support Russia.

On the one hand, some see the war as an invasion of an independent nation who are free to choose to align themselves with Europe.

On the other hand, some people see the war as liberating people from being severed from their deep and long-standing roots.

The difference is their beliefs.

Two very different sets of beliefs and convictions give very different lenses to see the conflict through.

This morning isn't the time to take sides or weigh the merits of the arguments.

The point is to see that wars are caused by a clash of different beliefs.

Fights, wars and quarrels are driven by what we believe.

In our passage today, James deals with why we can't have peace.

He unpacks the ultimate reason why there are wars between people.

But the same truth applies from the very highest levels of conflict between nations, right down to the wars that rage inside each one of us every day.

We mightn't necessarily pick up guns, but we constantly face fighting and divisions that are the result of our beliefs, even between Christians.

Outline

James wrote so that other Christians would be able to find wisdom in a fractured world.

He wants anyone who's reading this letter to grow up in maturity.

To not just to trust in the gospel, but to know what it looks like to live out the gospel in everyday life.

To clearly see the impact that faith has on the way that we live.

We don't really know exactly who James is writing to because he's not writing to particular Christians in a particular city.

It's very a very general letter, but the people who received it were probably mainly Christians who grew up Jewish.

They may have been scattered, perhaps forced to move out of Israel due to persecution from their fellow countrymen and women.

It's not hard to imagine, as perhaps James himself did, that there would be disagreements and divisions in the church.

Especially if there were blow-ins moving into the church who were seen as a threat to the status quo.

We know for sure from chapter one that there were divisions in the church between those who were materially wealthy and poor.

James addressed how we use our words with a particular nod to leaders.

James is clever and as each week goes on, I'm more and more impressed by the way that he weaves a number of themes together.

He doesn't just keep coming back to the same topics, but he keeps connecting them together for us in new and different ways.

James doesn't make this explicit, but I think what he's doing is this.

He's showing us what it means to be mature, to have pure religion.

True religion, mature faith is a living faith. It's lived out.

If you've got faith, you're going to see it expressed in good works.

If you've got a good heart, you're going to that reflected it in the words you use.

Now, if you're wise, then you're going to see it by being a peacemaker.

I need to start with a confession this morning.

The more I've meditated on this passage this week, the more convinced I've become that I really don't like it.

It's hard.

I've honestly lost count of the number of times and ways that I've had to apply it to situations that I've found myself in this week.

I've struggled as I've seen and felt the way others have failed to live according to this.

More importantly, I feel like a fraud because of the ways that I've failed to live up to it.

And if I'm really honest, there are times when I haven't even wanted to apply it.

I think it's the kind of passage that can only be taught with integrity when it's taught through brokenness, so the preparation and writing this talk has been a spiritual battle.

What does this have to do with you, friends?

Well, it's important for you to know that at least to some degree, I speak as a hypocrite.

But please don't let that be a reason for you to dismiss what I'm going to say because fortunately, it's not the preacher's job to convict you.

God's word needs to do that.

But if you're NOT convicted by what James says this morning, then perhaps it's worth asking whether you've really listened to what God, through James, has to say.

This passage should affect us all.

You might be left feeling a little fragile by God's Word today, if you come under conviction.

But if you stay there, we've only come half way and what James has to say becomes a dangerous half-truth.

A little knowledge can be dangerous unless we're also driven to the cross.

The gospel's where we can find forgiveness for our failures and freedom from our past.

The gospel is the good news that there's a remedy to our sickness and brokenness.

The gospel reminds us that although our sins are many, his mercy is more.

I need wisdom. We need wisdom.

And this passage is about having the right kind of wisdom.

Wisdom literature – like the proverbs – is full of sayings about the tongue.

Wisdom and control of the tongue are connected.

My prayer is that God would indeed give it to us this morning.

This goes deeper than just wanting a consultant to come and offer some of the latest self-management advice.

We need to receive the word implanted in us.

The big idea that we're going to see this morning is that **you know you are wise if you are a peacemaker.**

- Wisdom From Above (3:13)
Leads To Peace (3:17-18)
- Wisdom From Below (3:14-16)
Leads To Conflict (4:1-3)

Wisdom From Above... Leads to Peace

James starts this new section with another question and it's a cracker.

"Who's wise and understanding among you?"

Don't worry, I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but it's not just a rhetorical question to pass over.

I still think it's appropriate for each one of us to answer that question for ourselves – "Am I wise?"

Wisdom is more than just knowledge.

In the glossary of Fancy Nancy's Fancy Words (that I heard read out this week), it says that being wise is being 'smart and understanding'. That's not bad.

Wisdom is found where knowledge and practice come together.

Just as complete understanding isn't really knowing the all theory without any connection to the real world, wisdom is knowledge put to work in practice.

A little bit of knowledge – just enough to think that you know what you're talking about – can be a dangerous thing.

But when you're an expert, educated, knowledgeable in a way that means that you can be effective in what you do, that's gold.

That kind of wisdom doesn't have to come from a book, in fact, sometimes being book-smart can actually hinder you.

I've read about banjo valves, but Andrew Hoggs has forgotten more about them than I've ever learned because he's got years of experience working with them.

We've all come across people who promote themselves as being wise.

There's no doubt in their own mind that they're wise, just ask them.

That's their brand – you should listen to what I've got to say because I'm wise.

Sometimes those people get torn down as tall poppies (gotta love Australian culture), but other times they get promoted to the level of their own incompetence.

Most of us probably don't have the kind of bold self-assurance that would cause us to say that we're in the "wise" category.

But we certainly wouldn't want to take on the label of being foolish either.

Sure, we mightn't think that we're the wisest people out there, but we've definitely got stuff that's worth listening to.

If someone asks us for advice or our opinion on something, we don't say, "Sorry, I've got nothing."

We think that we're qualified enough that we're happy to hand out a bit of advice.

How can you tell if you're wise?

Are you just an expert in your own estimation, or do you really have wisdom?

"Show me," says James in verse thirteen.

James couldn't care less about the money, but he does say, "Show me the wisdom!"

Do you remember the hypothetical person James was arguing with in chapter two who said, "You have faith; I have deeds."

James said, "Show me."

Real faith will inevitably show itself in action.

To someone who claims to have wisdom, James says the same thing, “Show me.”

Real wisdom will inevitably show itself in deeds too.

That’s what wisdom does. It can’t just be bottled up inside.

Wisdom can be seen by what you do.

True wisdom will result in a good life and deeds done in humility.

The NIV is amongst the minority of English translations using the word humility.

Most go with the more literal term gentleness (CSB, NASB), or meekness (ESV).¹

I like how one dictionary describes it as “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.”²

Meekness wasn’t an attribute that was valued in Greco-Roman culture.

Being strong and dominate was considered the way to be successful and purposeful.

I’m not really sure that much has changed today with a clear preference for an alpha male – or whatever the name is for a woman with the same attributes – to rule the roost.

Which is so foreign to Jesus who allowed himself to be beaten, mocked, nailed to a cross and ultimately executed because standing up for his own rights was less important than doing the Father’s will.

Being gentle is having the right, but choosing to forgo it for the sake of others.

Wisdom is going to be shown by your restraint in the things you do, rather than self-promotion.

If you look down to verse seventeen, James describes true wisdom as being heavenly wisdom.

True wisdom is one of the good gifts that James talked about in chapter one that comes down from God himself.

Wisdom is connected to fearing God and not just having knowledge that we’ve managed to accumulate on our own.

Someone who’s wise is someone who’s got insight into the ways of God.

Job 28:28 NIV11 ²⁸ And he said to the human race, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.”

You’re not wise just because you’re willing to teach the word of God.

Remember the warning to teachers from last week?

Being wise means being truly willing to be taught by the word of God.

To sit under God's word rather than over it.

It means accepting the word planted in you, which can save you.³

Proverbs 15:33 NIV11 ³³ Wisdom's instruction is to fear the LORD, and humility comes before honour.

Wisdom that comes from heaven is pure.

It's not just mostly good, but ethically free from defect.

It's not divided or tainted by impurities.

We're given quite a long list describes what pure wisdom from above looks like.

It's peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Have a look at that list of positive characteristics and ponder them for a second.

Do you notice how other-person centred they are?

They look out for other people rather than for self.

Being considerate of others' needs rather than just our own.

Notice that it means being submissive rather than dominate – being willing to take it on the chin rather than always wanting to win.

Treating everyone the same way by extending mercy to everyone.

Not just showing mercy to some people and not others.

Wisdom is being sincere and not double-minded.

Wisdom doesn't result in strife.

We're called to be peacemakers.

In the Bible, peace isn't just the idea of there being silence and quiet.

You can sit alone in a quiet room with your heart racing and full of anxiety.

Peace is when you're left in a positive, prosperous, secure and content state.

I really struggled to find a good definition for peace this week.

Everyone kind of assumes that we know what it means or else just defines it as an absence of strife.

The Biblical idea of peace goes back to the Old Testament idea of shalom.

It's a "peace" that involves harmony between humans and God, humans and other humans, and humans with the natural world.

Peace is when everything is the right way, the way that it should be.

True peace starts with peace with God.

Through Jesus' death on the cross, the way was opened up for us to have a relationship with God.

The ugly sin that cut us off from a holy God was paid for and our account was permanently reset to zero from a negative balance.

Peace is God's way and that's why it's the way of the children of God.

Matthew 5:9 NIV11 ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Being a peacemaker does mean yielding to others.

True wisdom is knowing what to stand firm on and what to be flexible on.

And that's for the benefit of others.

If every single thing's a theological hill to die on, then it's probably not coming from wisdom, even though that might be the claim.

Ken Sande's book *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* is the go-to resource to think about this stuff.

Sande helpfully unpacks the how and why of being a peacemaker.

His four step process begins with a desire to give glory to God.

But then you need to make sure that you deal with the log in your own eye.

Only then do you try to GENTLY restore.

How it's done matters.

Being a peacemaker doesn't mean living a quiet life without any confrontation.

Peace doesn't come from aggressively demanding my rights, but from gently restoring others.

We need to be careful of settling for the artificial peace of niceness.

That can actually be an illusion of peace.

True peace is often born out of lots of hard conversations because true peace is only ever based on truth.

True peace isn't built by not caring about truth.

Peacemakers are multipliers.

They don't leave a trail of destruction in their wake.

A true peacemaker sows in peace and they produce a harvest of righteousness.

Again, James doesn't use righteousness to describe how we're made right with God, but he does use it to describe the fruit produced by those who are right with God.

We can plot it out the positives of wisdom from above like this:

Heavenly Wisdom > Gentleness > Peace

Wisdom From Below... Leads To Conflict

However, James also unpacks the alternative – what wisdom from below looks like.

It's not just me, but he isn't exactly Jovial James, isn't he?

Even from sheer number of words, he's got a lot more to say about false wisdom that leads to conflict.

Instead of deeds that result in all of the good stuff that we've just talked about, what if your life displays something else?

Zeal can be a good thing or a bad thing.

When it's bitter zeal – like here – it's definitely bad.

It's like the bitter water that comes out of the spring that he talks about in verse 11.

If you have bitter envy or jealousy, that's not a sign of wisdom.

Or at least, not a sign of godly wisdom.

The other driver to watch out for is selfish ambition.

This's interested in what you do to benefit yourself and not really on what's the benefit for the other person.

One ancient writer uses the same word to describe someone who seeks public office for private gain.

Angrily fighting for their own rights.

If your life is driven by a desire to climb over however many bodies it takes to make it to the top of the pile, that's selfish ambition.

They're the unholy pair that are the flip-side to the gentleness that comes from wisdom from above.

Don't boast about them and get confident in that kind of wisdom.

It's not that truly wise people – those who follow the wisdom from above – don't sin.

They most certainly do, but they don't celebrate it or deny it either.

Jeremiah redirected the people in his own day, saying:

Jeremiah 9:23–24 NIV11 ²³ This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, ²⁴ but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the LORD.

True wisdom – heavenly wisdom – is founded on truth, but this kind of wisdom denies the truth.

You can try and deny, but beware because the truth will come out.

It's going to be expressed in your actions.

It's worth noting that this really is a kind of wisdom that James is talking about.

It's a logic, a way of operating that does achieve and produce results.

We live in a world where everyone doesn't get their just desserts this side of the great day when we will be judged before the throne of heaven.

One of the hard realities that we have to face is that the wicked often do prosper in this world.

Prosperity isn't a measure of true religion though.

Prosperity isn't at all a good measure of true religion – in fact, where might we have heard that before?

Perhaps in James chapter 2.

And it also doesn't produce good and healthy relationships.

James is scathing in his description of the fruit that this kind of wisdom produces.

Have a look at verse fifteen:

James 3:15 NIV11 ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

Ouch. Don't hold back, James.

At best it's human and at worst it's from demons.

Earthly here means that it's earth-bound.

That kind of wisdom can't come from heaven because it makes absolutely no reference to God.

It's the kind of wisdom that restricts itself to this world and leaves God out of the picture.

The result is the kind of skewed picture of reality that the preacher of Ecclesiastes illustrates.

It's also unspiritual in the sense that it's not true religion.

Sometimes it can even be downright demonic.

Demon-inspired wisdom sounds really similar to words that flow off the tongue straight from the fires of hell.

Envy and selfish ambition will be accompanied by other fruit though.

Where they operate, there will be disorder and evil.

The word for disorder here is the same word for unstable in 1:18 and 3:8.

Wisdom from below destabilises and creates all kinds of hurt and frustration.

Which is the very opposite of God's character, which creates peace.

It's a different context, but Paul writes of God:

1 Corinthians 14:33 NIV11 ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.

Wisdom from below, this kind of wisdom leads to conflict.

These are some really important verses because they show us what's really going on in conflict.

In fact, using them and applying them to ourselves can help us to understand what's really going on.

Which brings us to the first three verses in chapter four.

These verses are scary and powerful, but I also think that these verses alone are worth the cost of admission.

James asks what causes fights and quarrels?

Sometimes it can be difficult to work out what causes quarrels and fights.

Our first port of call is often someone else, something external, the circumstances or situation.

It's the way that another person spoke to you, looked at you, did something that really, really annoyed you.

Perhaps because a disagreement goes back so far that no one can even really remember why it began.

“It was the circumstances,” we say, “I didn’t have a choice.”

James says that the answer to that is that they come from our desires.

The problem, James, says, is inside all of us.

The thing that causes fights, quarrels and wars are desires.

Our desires.

Our desires that come from inside us are the problem.

James 4:1 NIV11 ¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?

He’s really saying the same thing that he said back in chapter one.

Remember that he’s gone out of his way to argue that you can’t blame temptations on God.

Now he adds that you can’t blame them on other people either.

James wrote in verse 14:

James 1:14–15 NIV11 ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

We want to divide the world into heroes and villains.

Some of us put ourselves in the villains category.

We think that there’s nothing good that can come from us, so what’s the point.

If that’s you this morning, then you need to hear that there’s nothing too bad, too depraved for God to forgive.

Jesus’ death on the cross was sufficient to redeem anyone.

Most of us think that we’re the heroes though.

But if sin is inside us, then that can’t be the case.

Sin doesn’t just cause problems out there, but also inside of us.

As long as we think we are not that bad, the idea of grace will never change us.

How do we use these verses practically?

Well, James gives us a framework here for assessing what’s going on in our lives.

There are a series of questions that we can ask.

What are the desires that’re leading to me wanting to respond like this?

How are my desires impacting what I'm thinking here?
Are those desires that I have right, wrong or misplaced?

It could well be that the desires you have are completely godly.
When you consider them, you might find that they check out.
It's quite possibly that your desires really do reflect Christ.

Yet we need to remember Jeremiah 17:9:

Jeremiah 17:9 NIV11 ⁹The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

We can deceive ourselves and rationalise our desires.

They're almost always mixed and so others can sometimes help us to see what we can't see ourselves.

We need to honestly run things past others, being full and frankly honest about our motives.

Now, you often don't get to ask these questions of someone else.

In my experience, if you ask someone what desire is driving them, you get one of two responses.

The first one is, "What on earth are you talking about?"

Even amongst Christians, it's surprisingly uncommon to talk about our desires and how they might be leading us astray.

We jump to every other reason under the sun before we jump to the reasons that the Bible actually gives us.

Many of us have a massive disconnect between what we see in God's word and how we actually go about dealing with our problems.

The second response is that people are up.

Sometimes that's because you're actually hitting the nail on the head and they know it.

Hopefully your marriage can get to the stage where you can actually ask your spouse these questions about their desires without them seeing it as an attack.

You want to have the kind of relationship with your kids where you can ask them these questions too.

But even more than asking other people is our ability to ask ourselves.

We're typically much faster to interrogate other people's issues than we are our own.

We jump to assuming that it's their fault... and sometimes it is!

We know that we're right and we can give a list of reasons why we're right.

It's rare that we're completely blameless though, even though it might be really hard to even see the fault in ourselves.

It can be really helpful to ask the deeper question though.

We need to interrogate ourselves.

Now, I use the word interrogate intentionally.

What are the desires that are driving ME in this moment?

James gives some key examples in verse two.

Your desire is to have something, but you don't have that something, so you're willing to kill for it.

Is the killing wrong? You bet.

But if the desire is strong enough, then you'll do it anyway.

You want something that someone else has?

The word here is that you have zeal for it, just like in 3:16.

You can't get it on your own.

So, you quarrel and fight in an attempt to try and get hold of it.

Our desires are the drivers that lead us there.

James ends this off in a really interesting way.

He says that you don't have because you don't ask, verse two.

We all have a tendency to take things into our own hands.

Whether that's by failing to ask the person or failing to ask God.

We need to leave things in God's hands and in that sense, it's wise to let go and let God.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we're meant to simply be passive.

We take opportunities when they come up.

But the first step is quite simply to ask God to provide what we need.

Does that guarantee that God's going to provide it?

Not at all.

Sometimes we don't receive from God because we ask with wrong motives.

Verse three:

James 4:3 NIV11 ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

What are the wrong motives?

That you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

When we are seeking to look after number one.

When you're really trying to chase selfish ambition.

What do we do when we find that our desires are misplaced?

We go to the cross.

We need to repent and ask God for forgiveness.

Tim Keller has said:

In our world where everything is about promoting yourself, repentance feels brutal. But repentance is the only way to be healed.

At the cross, we find forgiveness.

Jesus died even for these sins and once you confess them, you get a fresh start to begin again.

We can't do it without his help.

We need God's wisdom.

We can plot it out how wisdom from below works like this:

Wisdom from Below > Selfish Ambition > Conflict

Conclusion

How do you know if you're wise?

Well, you're going to be able to see it.

Wisdom is going to result in true peacemaking.

We tend to think that quarrels and fights come from other people.

James says that no, they come from inside ourselves.

Our envy and selfish ambition is what causes the kind of chaos that we experience every day.

From large-scale wars right down to the way that we respond

This applies to our lives in a myriad of ways and I invite you to apply God's word to your life as we seek to grow in maturity in him.

¹ This's a tricky word that can mean gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness.

² BDAG

³ James 1:21

Blessed are the Peacemakers

James 3:13-4:3

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Big Question: How do you know if you are wise?

Big Idea: You know you are wise if you are a peacemaker.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you know what kind of wisdom someone has?
2. How does wisdom from below compare to wisdom from above?
3. It can be confronting for us to hear James describe a certain kind of wisdom as demonic. Is this surprising for James?
4. What do all the characteristics of wisdom from above have in common?
5. What do we often blame fights and quarrels on? Where does James say fights and quarrels are driven by?
6. What questions could you ask to interrogate how your desires are driving you?
7. Do you think the asking in verses two and three are of God, others or both?
8. Counselling scenarios:
 - a. Someone cuts you off in traffic and you respond in anger.
 - i. Why did you get angry?
 - ii. What desires could be at play here?
 - iii. Do you think your dominant desire is legitimate and godly?
 - b. One child hits another child.
 - i. Why did one child hit the other?
 - ii. What desires could be at play here?
 - iii. How might you discover if the dominant desire is godly?
 - c. One friend refuses to talk to another friend anymore?
 - i. Why aren't they talking?
 - ii. What desires could be at play here?
 - iii. How might you discover if the dominant desire is godly?