**Ask in faith for wisdom** 3/7/22 dkm

Read: Proverbs 1:1-19, James 1

Text: James 1: 5-8

Psalms: 1, 119:113-120, 111, 116:12-19, 72old

When Adam and Eve sinned they cut themselves off from the wisdom of their Maker; they were left to walk in the darkness of worldly wisdom. James tells us the marks of worldly wisdom at the end of chapter 3: ‘Envy, self-seeking, confusion and every evil thing’. I am sure you will agree that the media’s reporting on our society confirms what James says. But you may not agree that you lack the wisdom to live in a way that pleases God. Do you always act wisely? How do you react to trials? What does James say in 3:17 about wisdom from God? ‘Peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, and good spirits’. Do you find James a bit intimidating? Some like being religious, but do not let their religion affect the things they do in life. Apparently 44% of Australians say they are religious, but how many of these live in the fear of God, and with godly wisdom?

James teaches about active faith, about faith that works. Is your faith working? Last time we learnt about faith and trials, faith that perseveres when tested. Just as fire refines precious metals, so trials refine and strengthen our faith. If there is no faith our works will be burned up: ‘without faith it impossible to please God’ (Heb 11:6).

Today we learn about faith and wisdom; without wisdom we will bear no good fruit in our life (3:17). Our sub headings: ‘A lack of wisdom’, ‘Ask of God’ and ‘Ask in faith’.

**1. A lack of wisdom**

Since we are born in sin and cut off from God because of our sin, we are cut off from the source of wisdom. Many, including the dictionary, say wisdom comes from experience, but that depends on your experience, and on your definition of wisdom; what wisdom has Putin learned from his experiences! A lot of old people lack wisdom. Most agree that knowledge is important in life, and that with knowledge comes wisdom; we agree with the first premise but not necessarily the second. We send our children to school to gain knowledge but does this make them wise. Our educators think so; they keep teaching that drugs are harmful but what do we see? When it comes to cannabis and alcohol the experts don’t even agree on what to teach, so where does that leave the children?

Our ‘progressive society’ focusses on knowledge but leaves children to gain wisdom by experience, which can be dangerous. The Bible teaches us knowledge and wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom (Prov 1:7, 9:10). In the Bible we find the truth when it comes to knowledge, not the corrupted knowledge taught by the theory of evolution. The Bible teaches godly wisdom, wisdom given by our Maker. Fear of God or faith in God opens our hearts to asking for and receiving this wisdom.

The apostle Paul writes of the Greeks seeking after wisdom, which is commendable compared to unbelievers in our society, but the Greeks were condemned by Paul as being foolish in the eyes of God (1Cor 1:22). They made their own gods; dead gods are not able to impart wisdom. So the wisdom of the Greeks came from themselves as worldly wisdom. They had no fear of, or faith in, the true and living God. Paul reminds us that in Christ Jesus we see the wisdom of God; he became wisdom for us from God (1Cor 1:30). As the Son of God, Jesus grew in wisdom, with people asking, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom (Luke 2:40, Mark 13:34). Jesus spoke about the wise man building his house on the rock, and of the wise and foolish virgins at the wedding.

James knew what Jesus taught about wisdom, and also what is in the wisdom books of the OT. The book of James is often compared to the book of Proverbs in the OT. Wisdom is there personified as ‘lady wisdom’, warning a young man about the dangers of this world, particularly of alliances with wicked men or seductive women. Hence, fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of God’s commands essential.

**2. Ask of God**

If we were born with wisdom we would not need to ask God for wisdom, would we! If we could get wisdom by just living in this world we would not need to ask God for it, would we! Wisdom is not the same as experience; even old people lack wisdom, according to what James defines as wisdom (3:16). It is said that, ‘Man’s greatest need is to know what is his greatest need’. We might also say, ‘The wise man realises his need for wisdom’. When James writes, ‘If any of you lacks wisdom’ please do not exclude yourself! We all need wisdom in facing trials, and in making all sorts of decisions. Wisdom to believe in Jesus in the first place is our biggest decision; thankfully God gives us the faith to believe and make this decision, when we ask him.

In his sermon on the mount Jesus said, ‘Ask, and it will be given to you… for everyone who asks receives’ (Mat 7:7-8). He spoke of God being like a father giving good things to his children. God wants you to have wisdom, but you need to ask him first; God is not a bully! Jesus later told his disciples, ‘If you ask anything in my name I will do it’ (John 14:14); of course, ‘anything’ is what is good for us as determined by our loving Father.

James believed what Jesus said, and teaches us to do the same. He assures us that God is able to give - ‘it will be given him’- and that God is willing- ‘He gives liberally and without reproach’ (1:5). Some translate ‘liberally’ as ‘generously’; the Greek has the sense of a single mind. James is highlighting God’s ‘undivided intent to give us those gifts we need to please him’. And he gives ‘without finding fault’; He is not looking for a reason not to give us what we ask for.

Eve fell into Satan’s trap of believing that God was not ‘single-eyed’ or acting with integrity when he gave the command about the tree in the garden. There are still people who think that God does not always act with integrity and is sometimes malevolent towards them. Let no such thoughts enter your heart or mine!

**3. Ask in faith**

This leads to James teaching us about the way to ask God for wisdom, or anything for that matter. On the positive side, we must ask in faith (1:6). Faith is the same as believing. Faith is God’s gift to us by his Spirit. With the Spirit dwelling in our hearts we can, and must, ask in faith. We ask believing that God can and will give what we ask for. Jesus said, ‘Whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them’- Jesus qualifies this promise saying, ‘and does not doubt’ (Mark 11:23, 24).

We ask God in our prayer. James is big on prayer, we might say, on asking God for things, but not always physical things. Here he tells us to ask for wisdom; remember how King Solomon asked for wisdom and God gave him wisdom. James also tells us to pray when we are suffering, or when we are sick. He reminds us about Elijah praying for the rain to stop, and it did. He also condemns fights and quarrels which arise when people want things saying, ‘You do not have because you do not ask’ (4:2).

Do you sometimes feel that you have nothing to pray about? Maybe you have all the things you want- although most people are never satisfied with the things they have. Have you ever asked for wisdom? Have you ever asked the Lord to increase your faith? Maybe you have stopped praying because God is not answering your prayers. Do you think prayer is a waste of time? I am sure James will help you get back to regular and fervent praying. He is now going to tell us one reason we do not get what we ask for.

**4. Ask without doubting**

Asking in faith means no doubting when we pray; this is the negative side of James’ teaching on prayer and asking for wisdom. Faith cannot coexist with continual doubting. What is doubting? This is when we think God is not able to give what we ask for or that he is not willing to give. We are saying God is not omnipotent and/or is not love. If we come to God doubting his power and his goodness, he will not give us what we ask for because it will not be for his glory.

What would you think of a father who sometimes withholds good things from his son, or who gives his son a stone when he asked for bread? (Mat 7:9). If the son expressed doubts about his father’s readiness to give him what is good, you would not think highly of that father, would you? So what will people think about your heavenly Father if you express doubts about his readiness to give you good things?

In the wisdom of the Psalms, the double-minded man is condemned (Ps 119:113). A person with a divided heart is not fit to be a disciple of Jesus- look at the rich young ruler! The divided-heart man contrasts with the single-hearted or generous God- remember the Greek word (*haplos*) meaning ‘single’ in verse 5; here we have a ‘*di*’ word. Doubters or people who change their mind may be acceptable or even praised in our society, but not in God’s eyes. I recall the atheist, Peter Singer, being shocked that so many in the USA did not believe in evolution. He went over to educate them and change their minds, but failed. We still hear arrogant people saying they will change our minds about something. Jesus will not have followers who change their minds about him, people who are in love with him one day and out of love the next. They become ‘out of love’ because they start loving the world- in chapter 4 we will come to teaching on spiritual adultery.

James likes to illustrate his teaching with metaphors or similes. We come to the first of these in verse 6. The person who doubts when he asks for something from God is ‘like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind’ (1:6). I am about to go on a river cruise, but I have never been on an ocean cruise. I think that the rolling of the ship in a storm might make me sick in the stomach. James does not go this far in his illustration, but you get the picture of this up and down person, eager to pray one day but reluctant to pray the next, eager to be in church one week but reluctant to go the next.

As believers, we have a rock to stand on, an anchor for our souls, so let us stand firm on the rock of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus used the illustration of the wise man building his house on the rock, referring to the person who hears his words and obeys them (Mat 7:24f). A person lacking in faith or not exercising their faith, gets blown about by feelings, and by things they see or hear from others.

A person who lives out the faith they have been given, and who finds in Jesus Christ the source of all wisdom, will not go looking in other places for wisdom or for things that they think will profit them. They will walk by faith, not by sight, on the path set before them by Jesus Christ. Freedom rather than bondage is promised you who, in faith, ask for wisdom to live in the way that pleases God and brings glory to his holy name. ‘Follow me’, said Jesus, ‘and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free’ (John 8:32).