

Sermon by Canon Jim Holbeck at the Healing Service at St Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney,  
Wed 14 June 2006

Reading: James 3:13-18. Topic: *HOW TO LIVE THE GOOD LIFE.*

How can we live lives that are real, genuine, that can stand under scrutiny? Lives that are meaningful to ourselves and helpful to others. James says that the secret is in living wisely, living with the wisdom that God can give us, and not living a lie. He contrasts in this passage, the 2 types of wisdom that can be found among humans. He also brings out their effect on ourselves and others. He speaks in particular to those who are teachers in the church, but the principles apply to all of us.

### 1. WISDOM NEEDED TO LIVE THE "GOOD LIFE". (3:13)

You may remember that James began his epistle by encouraging those who felt they lacked wisdom, to ask God for it, and he would give it generously. God knows we need wisdom to live in this world, and He wants to give it to us. Sometimes however we're not open to receive the wisdom He wants to bring, or sometimes we think we're being wise, when in reality, we're being plain dumb. We may even be deceived.

In verses 13, James is saying that the person who is living by the wisdom God gives, is humble, and that humility shows itself in practical ways in that person's good life. The great thing about humility is that it is open. The humble person doesn't think he's arrived, that he has nothing to learn, especially from other people. There's an openness to correction or for re-direction; an openness to any necessary change of priorities in his life; an openness to change in behaviour.

### 2. THE ROOT OF FALSE WISDOM. (3:14.)

Here are 2 attitudes that can affect our behaviour in harmful ways.

**a. One is that of bitter jealousy.** We all know what it's like to be jealous. Jealous of someone else's property or possessions, of their beauty or their marriage or their academic ability, or their social standing.

It's something we need to recognise and to ask God to forgive us, and free us of. But it can get even deeper into our system, and become like a bitter root within, that affects everything we think and do.

Paul saw that even Christians needed to be warned about bitterness. He wrote to Christian husbands in Col 3:19, "Husbands love your wives, and don't be bitter towards them." He wrote to the Ephesians and told them, "Let all bitterness and wrath and clamour and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." 4:31.

The writer to the Hebrews warned his readers not to let any "root of bitterness" spring up and cause trouble, and so defile many. He knew that it was like an infection that would spread and affect many people, just as the bad apple affects the good apples packed around it.

The root of bitterness can be within us as individuals, and it can spread to others. How many of here tonight have belonged to churches where an individual has spread his or her venom, and it's affected the whole life of the church.

Bitter jealousy is often hidden deep within a person. There's a mountain called "Burning Mountain" north of Sydney, where fire continues to burn deep under the surface, year after year. The closer you get to it, the more you become aware of the heat and the stench coming from deep below.

Bitter people can be like that. But that bitter jealousy can also be expressed in words. Some of us may need prayer that the bitter jealousy deep within us may be confessed by us and by the grace of God removed.

**b. The other attitude is that of selfish-ambition.** It's the desire to be noticed, the desire to become a name, the desire to be thought of more highly than that other person. It's also translated as rivalry, and as creating factions. The basic meaning is that I want to be Number 1 in the eyes of other people, and if necessary to have them leave the loyalties they have, and

join me or my cause. It's this sort of selfish-ambition for oneself that causes bitter jealousy to be expressed in criticism of that other person.

Some religious movements, possibly some Christian groups have begun on that wrong motivation. The person with selfish-ambition in an effort to promote his own cause tries to drag down the other movement, or the leader of that church, and to woo people to himself. They're called splinter groups, because they split off like a splinter. The trouble is, splinters can cause infection within the body, and bring a lot of pain.

If you belong to a group where the leadership is telling you to separate from fellowship with other Christians, you need to ask God whether the leadership is open to His wisdom, and to His plan and purpose.

Is it a group that God is building to His glory, or is it being built to the glory of its human leader?

### 3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FALSE WISDOM. (3:15)

These are described here as:- i. earthly, ii. unspiritual, iii. demonic.

**i. The wisdom based on bitter jealousy and selfish ambition**, doesn't come from God, but from human thinking. It is of the earth, not from heaven. It has not come down as a gift from God, but has arisen from thoughts that God never inspired.

**ii. It is a wisdom that is unspiritual, because the Spirit of God never gave it.**

**iii. It is a wisdom that may be demonic, in that the person was open to deception.**

They thought they understood the significance of what they were doing, but were deceived by the thoughts that came from the powers of darkness. We only have to look at the Jonestown massacre few years ago to realize how deceived we can be, and how gullible people can be in following a charismatic sort of figure.

Hitler had incredible powers of persuasion to motivate many in the nation to follow him, but it was all deception. In fact many have said that his power was demonic.

### 4. THE EFFECT OF FALSE WISDOM. (3:16)

When jealousy and selfish ambition are present, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

What's your life like as an individual? Is there disorder and perhaps dis-ease that comes from disorder. If so, have you been operating on human wisdom, being self-sufficient, leaving God out of your life and your thinking, rather than opening up to God as we're all meant to do? It's only as we come to God, and let Him give us His wisdom that life makes any real sense. Apart from Him, there is no ultimate meaning, nor purpose.

James says there can be every vile practice when God's wisdom is not known or ignored. There are things that some people do, thinking that they are serving a supreme being, that are an abomination to God. It's only as God gives us His wisdom that we see the need to turn from those things that He declares are harmful and damaging. The wisdom of the world is that you live for yourself, you realize your potential even it means stepping over other people. As long as you get to the top, that's all that matters. So some people allow selfish-ambition and bitter jealousy in their lives as they can be the things that motivate us to "succeed". But that's not what God says in His wisdom, because He knows there is no real fulfilment in that way.

### 5. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUE WISDOM. (3:17)

These are described simply as pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. J.B. Phillips puts it, "The wisdom that comes from God is first utterly pure, then peace-loving, gentle, approachable, full of tolerant thoughts and kindly actions, with no breath of favouritism, or hint of hypocrisy." Are those the qualities that characterize you? The good news of the gospel is that you can be like that. God can make you a brand-new person, with a whole new way of thinking, so that you can begin to live the good life, knowing the wisdom of God in your thoughts and your actions.

I believe most of us have lived outside the wisdom of God, and because of that we have suffered the damage that a life lived outside His will inevitably brings. We have carried resentments towards others, we have known bitterness in our hearts, and it's created havoc

with our physical health. We may have suppressed guilt or excused our wrong actions until we became emotionally confused and even broken down emotionally.

On the other hand, we may have suffered because those around us were not operating according to the wisdom of God, and their advice to us. Their actions towards us were based on human reasoning alone.

Some of us may even have been the victims of that which was demonic in origin, suffering because those people around us had closed their hearts towards God, and opened themselves to the deceit of the powers of darkness, and in some way we were injured.

God can give us the wisdom we need to live lives that will bring freedom rather than bondage, victory rather than defeat, and meaning rather than meaninglessness. All we need is to come to Him, confessing our stupidity, asking Him to forgive our sin, and to give us the wisdom we need to live the good life. As we saw in 1:5, 6. He promises to give us that wisdom to live life as we ought, knowing His guidance, knowing His blessing, knowing His healing.

There is also good news for those who have been injured by the words and actions and attitudes of those who were deceived, or who acted according to earthly wisdom in their approach to us, or who deliberately set out to hurt us. There may be a need to forgive those people for what they did or said which has damaged us physically or emotionally. Jesus did that. He was the victim of other people's sin. They acted according to human wisdom, and failed to recognize the significance of this person before them. As He hung upon a cross, He cried, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Those who acted badly towards you may have been acting according to human wisdom and not God's. They may have seen you as someone who would serve them, rather than they serve you, to be used, rather than seeing you as significant, one made in the image of God, to be loved and affirmed and protected.

#### **6. THE EFFECT OF TRUE WISDOM. (3:18)**

The "changed you" can change the world. As J.B. Phillips put it in verse 18, "The wise are peace-makers who go on quietly sowing for a harvest of righteousness- in other people and in them." Ready to change the world? Ask God for the wisdom to live the "Good Life" Ask Him to heal you of all the damage He knows has been done to you, and you will find that He will because He loves you and wants to use you in His purposes of love.