



## **WORLDLY WISDOM ON WEALTH**

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This past week I went to see a cardiologist. Before I even got to see the doctor, her assistant gave me a ECG. These have changed a lot over the years! When I first started to have them done as a child, it involved lots of gel and suction cups attached all over my chest – when they finished, I looked like I had been attacked by an octopus! Now they simply attach little stickers and connect the wires to those – much nicer. The ECG tells the doctor important information about the electrical activity of the heart so that she can see if it is functioning normally. In a few weeks I will have an echocardiogram which gives the doctor more information about the mechanical functioning of the heart. These are all vital tools for the cardiologist that allow her to see what is happening inside my body.

A cardiologist takes care of my physical heart. But I also have a non-physical heart. The heart is also what we call the core of our being, the home of our desires and thoughts and emotions. It is what drives our decisions and actions. In James, we have seen that one of the influences on our hearts is the kind of wisdom which we follow – worldly wisdom or Godly wisdom. But how do we know which kind of wisdom in ruling in a person's heart? We can't do an ECG or an echocardiogram to 'see' this kind of heart! James says that what is in our heart can be seen, however, in our actions. He's already looked at the way we treat each other in the things we say and do. How we handle our personal relationships is evidence of whether our heart is turned towards God or towards the world around us.

Now James is going to move into a different area – that of our relationship with money and how that affects the way we act in the world. James reserves his harshest words in his epistle for those he sees as being influenced by worldly wisdom in this area. In fact, some commentators believe that he couldn't possibly be talking about Christians in this section. They feel he is instead talking about non-Christians who were oppressing the Christians. This possible, but if it were so, then this would be the only place in the book where James is not talking about Christians and that seems a bit strange. I think it is helpful to remember that although many of the new believers were Jews and therefore knew the Old Testament ethical standards, some would not have had this background. God's righteous standards were all new to them and they were still thinking through what it meant to love God and love their neighbour. They didn't always get it right, but then even all these years later, we don't always get it right either!

## Worldly Wisdom

So how does James think they are being influenced by worldly wisdom?

### 1. Arrogant planning

Back at the beginning of the year we looked at the verses at the end of chapter four as we were thinking about the different times and seasons which God guides us through. Worldly wisdom says that we have the right to control our lives - to make our own plans based on our own desires and abilities. These last couple of years have reminded us that while this is what we'd like to think, it doesn't match up with reality. I don't believe that James is saying we should never make plans or engage in business ventures. However, only God knows what will happen tomorrow and only He knows what is best for us. As God's children, we are not our own, we are His and our future is in His hands, not ours. Our thinking and decisions need to be made with this in mind. And this is not just an attitude which is nice to have. It is not an optional extra. James says if they know the right thing to do – which he has just told them! – and they don't do it, then it is sin.

### 2. Earthly wealth

Part of the problem with this kind of arrogant planning is that it leads people to focus on amassing earthly wealth. Here James really steps up the harsh language, talking in a way that is reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets as they warned the Jews of God's impending judgement for their sinfulness. *"Look here, you rich people: Weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you."* (5:1) *"Look here"* could also be translated as *"Wake up and see what you are doing!"* It is an urgent plea for change. They are following the earthly wisdom which says that they have a right to keep for themselves what they have gained from their planning and hard work. But James says they will get no pleasure from their ill-gotten gains. If changing economic fortunes don't take it away, natural processes will eventually bring decay. It is interesting to see James say that their gold and silver will be corroded. Pure gold and silver aren't subject to corrosion! I don't think James is being ignorant here. It may be that he is indicating that their gold and silver isn't as pure as they thought and that it is the impurities which are corroding. On the other hand, he might be painting an exaggerated picture in order to make a point. I tend to think it is the latter, because he then goes on to say that not only is it corroding, but it will go on to corrode them. In other words, the wealth around which they are building their lives will eventually be destroyed and will destroy them in the process. And finally, it will be used in evidence against them when they face God's judgement for God holds us accountable for what we do with what we have.

### 3. Self-centred living

But James isn't finished yet! One of the things which can happen when we become focussed on accomplishing our own plans and obtaining more advantage and wealth for ourselves is to stop treating people well. We become so focused on ourselves that we don't care how our actions affect others. The example which James gives is that of farmers who hire day-labourers to work on their farms and they are not paying them a fair wage. In order to make money, they have to cut costs and, in this case, it is the lowest workers who suffer because they can't fight back – there were no unions in those days! James paints a horrible picture of the landowners stuffing their faces like pigs heading to be slaughtered, totally unconcerned about anything other than their pleasure. However, God will not allow their selfishness to go on forever. There will come a day of judgement when the Lord of Heaven's Armies will put things right because He cares for the oppressed.

## Godly Wisdom

Whew! James doesn't hold any punches, does he! We could stop it here and maybe feel a bit happy with ourselves because we know these things are wrong and would never act like this. But I don't

think it is enough to just know what is wrong, we also need to know right way to act. We need to recognise worldly wisdom, and we need to know godly wisdom. To discover this, we'll look at both what James says and what Jesus says.

### 1. Humble planning

As we said earlier, James is not saying that we should not plan at all. He does say, however, that we must plan in submission to God and His will because God is the one who is ultimately in control – not us. We don't know everything, and we can't control everything but that is OK because God does know everything and He can control everything. When we work in harmony with Him, then our planning is good and beneficial. This also guards against our planning only taking into account what we want and what is good for us.

### 2. Heavenly wealth

Jesus talks about this when He says, *“Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.”* (Matthew 6:20) Instead of working to obtain physical rewards here on earth, we should be working for eternal rewards. This keeps our hearts focussed on God and His good rather than our own benefit. Whereas earthly riches can make our lives a little easier here on earth, they so often fail us in the important things like mental well-being and personal satisfaction. And we certainly can't take them with us when we die! Only what is done for God lasts forever. Anything else so often pulls us away from God and leaves us with pain and worry.

### 3. God-centred living

After assuring people that our Heavenly Father cares deeply for us and will always care for us, Jesus calls His followers to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. As Jesus says, *“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money.”* (Matthew 6:24) This doesn't mean that we all have to become cloistered monks or nuns and remove ourselves from the world! But it does mean that we can't centre our lives on both God and ourselves. I believe this is a process. As we mature in Christ, He will show us new areas in our lives where we are not following Him whole-heartedly. Then we have choice between following Him in this new way or continuing as we are. If we choose to continue as we are, we are choosing to say “No” to obeying God.

### **What makes this hard?**

I think that all of us here look at these two lists and see the obvious difference and want to do what is right. Why wouldn't we want that? We are God's children and we have chosen to follow Him. So why aren't we all perfect in this area? What makes this hard? I think there are two things that hinder our growth in relationship to money and economic righteousness.

Firstly, everything around us shapes our thinking with worldly wisdom. It is the very air we breathe and the culture we inhabit. Every time we turn on the TV, explore the internet, read a book, catch up on the news, or go shopping, we are being shaped by worldly wisdom. Often, we can't even see this because we don't know any other way to think and live. But God wants to change this. I love the Phillips translation of Romans 12:2: *“Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within ...”* This is a choice we need to make allow God to show us what needs changing and cooperate with His work in our lives.

Secondly, in today's global economy, we are often far away from the impact of our economic actions. In James' world, if your selfish economic decisions caused harm to other people, you knew it. If you mistreated someone who was producing your food, they lived just down the road, and you knew exactly what you were doing and could see the consequences for them – and so could everyone else! Today, it is not so straight-forward. When we buy clothes which have been made overseas, do we know the conditions under which they have been made? It is very difficult to know if the garment workers are being paid an honest wage or if they have been forced to work 12 hours a day in atrocious conditions and are paid barely enough to keep them alive so that the company can make a profit. When we buy food in the supermarket, do we have any idea if the farmers have received a fair price for their produce? Unfortunately, the major supermarket chains often wield such power that they can demand that the price of food is kept low – sometimes even lower than its costs to grow. But so often we don't know this. I know that none of us would choose to withhold a fair wage from anyone who produces the things we buy, but so often we have no way of knowing what is happening.

### **Where do we start?**

So, if we want to do the right thing and have our actions aligned to Godly wisdom rather than earthly wisdom, where do we start?

If we truly want to be guided by God and His wisdom, then we must learn to actively seek God's leading in all decisions. I must say, this is not our first instinct! But we can learn to stop and listen to what God has to say about things before running ahead with our own plans. This acknowledges that our minds and hearts need God's guidance in order to not just go along with the worldly wisdom around us.

This leads us to be generous with what God has given us instead of holding on to things for our own benefit. I discovered an interesting thing when studying Jesus' words in Matthew. He says: *"Your eye is like a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is filled with light. But when your eye is unhealthy, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is!"* (Matthew 6:22,23) The word translated "healthy" is also used to denote generosity and the word translated "unhealthy" can also be used to denote stinginess. If this is so, Jesus is saying that if your outlook is generous, then you will be filled with light, but if your outlook is stingy, then you will be filled with darkness. And if you think you are generous, but you are actually stingy because your perspective is so twisted by sin, then you are in big trouble because you are seeing things totally wrong. Something interesting to think about!

Finally, although we are very separated today from the consequences of our economic decisions, we can become more aware of our impact. Because everyone's lives and situations are different, this will look different for different people. Here is where we need to put last week's lesson into practice and not be quick to judge each other based on what God has called us to do. One area I have sought to increase my awareness and change my actions, is in the food I buy. I don't know if you have seen the logos for FairTrade or the Rainforest Alliance on your coffee, chocolate or tea? This indicates that the products have met some basic standards on how they have been grown and paid for. I am not endorsing everything that these organisations might say, but I have started to look for these on the products I buy because I want to have some assurance that I am not taking advantage of people unknowingly. My favourite chocolate – Lindt Excellence Dark Chocolate – is not a part of the FairTrade certification but has their own program to improve the lives of those who grow their chocolate. It is impossible to know exactly what is happening on the ground, but it is a start. Other people might choose to pay a little more to buy local produce directly from the growers

or support small businesses. As we listen to God, He will show us what He wants us to do according to our own circumstances. There is no 'one size fits all' in this.

### **A final thought**

You have probably heard the saying, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last." I read the full poem that is based on this saying for the first time this week and I think it is a fitting way to end this sermon.

### **Only One Life - by C.T. Studd**

*Two little lines I heard one day,  
Traveling along life's busy way;  
Bringing conviction to my heart,  
And from my mind would not depart;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, yes only one,  
Soon will its fleeting hours be done;  
Then, in 'that day' my Lord to meet,  
And stand before His Judgement seat;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, the still small voice,  
Gently pleads for a better choice  
Bidding me selfish aims to leave,  
And to God's holy will to cleave;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, a few brief years,  
Each with its burdens, hopes, and fears;  
Each with its days I must fulfill,  
living for self or in His will;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*When this bright world would tempt me sore,  
When Satan would a victory score;  
When self would seek to have its way,  
Then help me Lord with joy to say;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Give me Father, a purpose deep,  
In joy or sorrow Thy word to keep;  
Faithful and true what e'er the strife,  
Pleasing Thee in my daily life;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Oh let my love with fervour burn,  
And from the world now let me turn;  
Living for Thee, and Thee alone,  
Bringing Thee pleasure on Thy throne;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, yes only one,  
Now let me say, "Thy will be done";  
And when at last I'll hear the call,  
I know I'll say "'twas worth it all";  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*