

## **“Being Wise, and Being Successful: Are They the Same Thing?”**

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman  
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury  
**September 20, 2015**

**READINGS:** Psalm 1 (Voices United #724)  
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

There were those in the early church who wondered about the letter of *James*. Did it really speak to the issues of the day? Did it address concerns that people had as to how to live their faith in a changing world?

Those concerns were raised to new heights when Martin Luther suggested that if he were re-writing the New Testament, the book of *James* would not even be included in the Holy Scriptures. It spent too much time on emphasizing what we do, and too little on the importance of simply having faith.

Today’s reading from *James* is a focal point for much of what the letter has to say to people of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and to people today.

And James is not subtle in what he has to say.

In fact, for anyone who watched the Republican Party CNN debate on Friday evening, James at first blush sounds like a regular exchange between candidates Donald Trump and Carly Fiorina.

No doubt most of you have heard about “the Donald.” The New York based real estate mogul, estimated to be worth \$4 billion, and whose annual income is upward of \$250 million, has raced to the front of the GOP Presidential stakes through name recognition in part from the stewardship of a popular television show known as “The Apprentice,” and through making outrageous comments about the economy, immigrants, and his other competitors that has drawn

interest from a select yet loyal following. In a race of more than a dozen candidates, a person polling 17-24% is bound to be a front runner.

Carly Fiorina is less known. Her political height until now was reached when she ran for the Republicans in the 2010 California senate race, losing to long time Senator (and before that, San Francisco Councillor) Barbara Boxer by 10% of the vote.

Carly has become the main attack candidate against both Trump and Hilary Clinton, the *de facto* poll leader among Democrats.

Fiorina as head of Hewlett Packard convinced over 80,000 employees to take a pay cut in order to save jobs in 2001, then six months later axed 6,000 jobs. Many felt she lost all credibility with that move, and could not be trusted again.

She was asked to resign from HP in 2005 due to tensions with the Board and an amalgamation with Compaq computers, although business analysts are less critical of her business moves now than they were as they were happening.

So what has all of this got to do with anything your concerned about, much less the letter of James?

Well, James uses strong language, not unlike the two GOP Presidential candidates outlined above. He speaks with what may be seen as outrageous terminology, putting himself above others, some may argue, and suggesting he has more insight than anyone else.

(After all, Donald Trump declared his 1987 book ***The Art of the Deal*** was his “second favourite book in history.” The first? “The Bible.” When asked to name his favourite verse, Trump replied: “I don’t like to give out that kind of information to people I have barely met.”)

In listening to Forina and Trump, one has a sense that they are both competing for the title of the best business person on the campaign trail. And if you want to find out who is superior, just ask them – they will tell you.

But the letter of *James*, despite its strong language, is not about a self-centred approach or an attempt to put oneself ahead of others. James is not interested in proving himself right again the hordes of people in the world – he wants people to step back, take a breath, and figure out exactly what brings life to them, and how they can enhance the life of others.

*James* suggests that much of the turmoil we face in our everyday lives is an inner turmoil, when we are unclear about what we value and blame others for our own uncertainties. It is always easier to blame what others do than to accept responsibility ourselves.

I am more and more discouraged, even disgusted, by a trend I see wherever I go. To hear the full rant read next week's newspaper column. I wrote it with some trepidation, but now that it is out there I can't leave the topic alone.

And besides, *James* allows me to speak about it.

It seems wherever I go – from buying a bottle of wine to getting a few groceries to picking up some Hallowe'en candy, I am invited to "give a dollar" to this charity or "would you donate \$2?" to that charity.

It is not the invitation that bothers me as much as the attitude behind it. "If we only gave a \$1 or \$2 to something valuable we have done an honourable thing in our lives."

Doing good does not have a monetary value, but embarrassing people into giving that way does not change our behaviour, does not encourage generosity, does not even give a message that we should think about others.

In 2010 in Canada 25% of the donors to all charities represented 83% of all contributions received. And how much did those people give -- \$358 or more a year. That means a gift of \$30 a month for all of the charitable givings in a year puts you and me among the elite givers of Canada.

Now for some that amount represents a huge percentage of their income, and is indeed a generous gift. But I want to focus on the average gift. If those who are among the most generous give this amount, then it means an average person gives \$1 or \$2 a week to charity. In other words, most people give little, so one way to get something from them is if we ask them to give a loonie at the grocery store, or a toonie at the liquor store, or some change at the coffee shop. Gifts may increase, but no change of heart and attitude ensues. In fact, people may correctly say on the regular, personal appeal from various organizations: "I gave at the grocery store."

**James** asks us all a more basic question: What are you doing in life for yourself, and what are you doing in life for the concern and benefit of others?

It is not an either/or – it is a both/and.

And when in 4:8 he talks about the people who are "double-minded," asking them to "cleanse your hands, and purify your hearts," James is really saying that too often we try to make looking out for our own self-interest as a means of showing our concern for others.

Being clear about what is right for one's own well-being, and what is right for the well-being of others, knowing when I must look after myself and my family and loved ones, and when I must turn to help and be concerned about others, are big questions. There is no easy answer, or set formulas to offer to anyone. I am sorry it is not that easy.

But James does not say it is easy – he only says that it is a process we must engage in if we are to be truly followers of Christ.

We have these “two spirits” – human and holy, earthly and heavenly, self and others – and we need to be aware of their power on our lives, and the need to focus on what is appropriate at any given time.

Donald Trump and Carly Fiorina will continue to bash each other in future debates, and will try to assure potential voters who has the goods to be the next American President. They may convince people on what they offer as individuals, how they will “be the best” for office. They will leave aside the question the book of **James** has asked: “What do you offer to help those around you?”

Even in James’ day people prayed “to be right” or “to be the best” or “to have the most success in the accumulation of life’s assets.”

James just wanted a few people – a few people who chose to listen to what Jesus taught – to ask the question of themselves: “What is God calling me to do, and am I willing to do it?”

For James, the wise care, and ultimately succeed, in meeting the real goals in life God places before them.