

Lesson 7
James 3:13 – 4:5

James is a difficult book to teach because each verse is so deep and rich. It is hard to know when to quit gathering material on one verse and move on to the next.

Also, James is an uncomfortable book to teach and to study. Each verse is so direct and so clear, it leaves little doubt about just how far we are from that perfect standard we are to follow. If anyone can read the book of James and not feel uncomfortable, then either that person is the best person on earth or the worst.

Verse 13: Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

The question introducing this section, "who is wise and understanding among you," is in fact a challenge. If you claim to be wise, then demonstrate your wisdom with the works that true wisdom produces. "God's law is for living, and his truth is for thoughtful application to the varied circumstances of the day."

The Bible nowhere places much value on knowledge that remains merely in your head. Nothing is really known until it reshapes your life. For this reason, the way of wisdom is the way of obedience.

Some commentators think that James' question may have been directed particularly to the teachers or rather the would be teachers that he mentioned up in verse 1. But James clearly considers wisdom to be a virtue that is available to all, rather than just to teachers.

In Chapter 2, James told us that a real living faith must manifest itself in works. He tells us something very similar here about true wisdom -- true wisdom, like a living faith, has as much and perhaps more to do with how we live than with what we think or even say.

This view of wisdom, of course, is very different from how our modern world views wisdom. But James, not surprisingly, is true to the Old Testament view of wisdom. In the Old Testament, wisdom is a way of life. It is the attitude and the conduct of a Godly person. And that is how James is describing it here.

But James also talks about the meekness of wisdom -- two subjects that rarely go together in our modern age. "The lives of many who would like to be thought of as wise and expert tell what they think of meekness!"

Even in James' time, meekness was hardly seen as a virtue by the Greek world. One Greek philosopher listed meekness first in his list of moral faults!

But Matthew 11:29 tells us that Jesus was meek. And in Matthew 5:5, Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who are meek. Christian meekness is not a sign of weakness (as the Greeks viewed meekness) but rather is a sign of great strength. Meekness has been called a "self-subduing gentleness."

Christian meekness involves an understanding of our relation to God and to our fellow man. The meek man is not filled with pride at his own accomplishments, but instead is filled with humility as he works to fulfill the plans of God here on earth.

Meekness is a virtue. And Jesus gave us the perfect example of meekness to follow in his total focus and devotion to fulfilling the will of his Father.

Verse 14: But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

Verse 14 shows us the opposite of meekness, which is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

Now jealousy is not always a bad thing. In fact, the Greek word used here for jealousy is from where we get our word "zeal" or "zealous," and John 2:17 tells us that Jesus himself was consumed by zeal for the house of God.

But the problem is that a true, unselfish zeal for God sometimes lies very close to a harsh, self-centered zeal that is motivated by self ambition and jealousy. It is the jealousy or zeal in this sense that Paul often condemned. (Romans 13:13, 2 Corinthians 12:20, Galatians 5:20) And it's that same time of zeal or jealousy that James condemns here. It is a jealousy motivated by self ambition and envy of others.

The Greek word translated "selfish ambition" is rarely used. In pre-New Testament occurrences (in Aristotle, for example) the word refers to the narrow, partisan zeal of a politician. This understanding fits well with how James uses the word. "It is an inclination to use unworthy and divisive means for promoting one's own interests."

Some who pride themselves on their wisdom and on their understanding are displaying a jealous, bitter partisanship that is the opposite of the meekness produced by true wisdom.

The church does not have political parties, even though what we often see

within it is the same sort of conservative versus liberal battles that we see around us in the world of politics. When you see political parties and cliques developing in the church, you are not seeing a result of true wisdom, but rather you are seeing the result of selfish ambition and jealousy.

Now certainly some battles are worth fighting and in fact must be fought, but the old adage remains true that "little men make big issues out of little issues" and in doing so they can cause great harm to the body.

People of this sort certainly should never boast about wisdom. To boast about wisdom while demonstrating jealousy and selfish ambition gives lie to the truth that true wisdom must go hand in hand with humility.

We should note here that James is contrasting division and truth. Over and over again, the formation of a split has been justified as standing for the truth – and certainly sometimes that justification has been correct, but not always. Sometimes it has been a lie against the truth motivated not by truth but by bitter envying and strife. Much more personality driven than doctrinally driven. If we are really standing for the truth, then let's make sure we don't forget about the truth here in James 3.

Verse 15: This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

In verse 15, James contrasts false wisdom with the true wisdom that comes down from above.

True wisdom comes only from God. Proverbs 2:6, for example, tells us that the Lord gives wisdom. That is why it can be found only by asking God as James told us in 1:5.

The wisdom that displays selfishness and envy has quite a different nature and origin. James describes that false wisdom with three adjectives.

First, this wisdom is earthly rather than heavenly. Earthly as used here means transitory, weak, and imperfect. Paul had the same thought in mind in Phil. 3:19 where he said that the enemies of the cross of Christ have their minds set on earthly things.

A second adjective that James uses to describe this false wisdom is that it is unspiritual. The Greek word used depicts that part of man where human feeling and human reason reign supreme. God plays no role in the understanding and the decisions of the unspiritual man. In every other New Testament occurrence, that word is explicitly contrasted with spiritual. See, for example, 1 Corinthians

2:14 or 15:44, 46, and we will see it when we get to Jude 19.

The third adjective used by James to describe this false wisdom is that it is devilish. Literally, it pertains to demons. (James is never one to mince words!) This word occurs only here in the Greek New Testament -- and it could refer to a wisdom that is demonic in nature or in origin (or both). That type of wisdom of course does not produce a life that is pleasing to God.

James has just told us that this false wisdom is characterized by three things: the world, the flesh, and the devil. In each of these descriptions it is the direct opposite of the true wisdom that comes from above -- the wisdom that is heavenly in nature, spiritual in essence, and divine in origin.

Verse 16: For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

In verse 16, James justifies his harsh verdict on false wisdom by describing the effects that it produces. He has already singled out jealousy and selfish ambition, but now James points out how these attitudes inevitably lead to disorder and every evil work or every vile practice.

The Greek word used here for "disorder" is the noun form of the adjective that James used in 1:8 and 3:8 to characterize the double-minded man and the double-speaking tongue. And as we have seen, this is a major theme in the book of James that we will have much more to say about when we move into Chapter 4.

The Greek word denotes a restless, unsettled state. Paul used it in 1 Corinthians 14:33. There, after pleading with the Corinthians to refrain from an unbridled and unorganized display of their individual spiritual gifts in the worship assembly, Paul reminded them that God is not a God of confusion but of peace. The Greek word used there for confusion is the same one we see here translated "disorder."

Confusion and disorder will inevitably break out in the church when Christians and their leaders are focused on pursuing their own ambitions and their own partisan. That sort of situation leads to every vile practice, James tells us.

Verse 17: But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

In verse 17, James, having already described what the wisdom from above is not, tells us what it is and what it does. And he does so with another series of

adjectives.

James offers us an ethic not of verbs (do this) or of nouns (naming this or that item of good conduct) but of adjectives (about the type of people we are to be whatever we do).

James' description of the wisdom from above reminds us of Paul's description of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. And we mentioned that passage in our last lesson when we looked at self-control. There is little verbal resemblance between the two passages, but the emphasis in both texts is on humility, peacefulness, and upright behavior. What Paul says the spirit produces, James says wisdom produces.

This similarity, coupled with the fact that James never (or perhaps only once as we will discuss when we get to 4:5) explicitly mentions the Holy Spirit may point to the equivalence of the true wisdom sent from above and the Holy Spirit in James' thinking. And we know, of course, that the Holy Spirit has given us the true wisdom from above in the inspired word of God.

The first and overarching attribute of wisdom is its purity. It is unadulterated by the wisdom of man. True wisdom is free from any stain or blemish. To have that true wisdom we must -- as James tells us -- keep ourselves unspotted by this world.

James also tells us that true wisdom is peaceable. The Old Testament tells us this as well. Proverbs 3:17, for example, tells us that the path of wisdom is peace. And Paul, of course, listed peace as a fruit of the spirit.

The James of Acts 15 and 21 was a peacemaker. There was much then that tended toward division and disharmony, but James labored to keep the opposed causes together in Christ. It is that same spirit and that same experience that we see here.

Why is wisdom peaceable? Because, James tells us, it is also gentle and open to reason. 2 Corinthians 10:1 tells us that Jesus was characterized by meekness and gentleness.

The person who is open to reason is one literally who is easily persuaded. But we need to be careful here. James does not mean easily persuaded in the sense of a weak gullibility, but rather in the sense of a willing deference to others in matters of opinion, which by all accounts seem to have been the source of the disputes that James was specifically addressing here. Perhaps it does not as much mean *easily* persuaded, as it does *readily* persuaded and possibly also winning, able to gain the consent of others.

Wisdom is also full of mercy and good fruits. And James provides a definition of mercy in 2:8-13 -- it is that love for the neighbor that shows itself in actions.

The next attribute, without impartiality, is the most difficult to define. It may mean impartial in the sense of not exhibiting prejudice, or it may mean straightforward or unwavering, not doubting or being divided. This latter interpretation seems to fit best with the context because we have seen repeatedly James' emphasis on the need to be undivided, not of two minds.

Finally, the wisdom from above is without insincerity or hypocrisy. It is genuine. It is without any show or pretense. It doesn't flaunt its own intelligence or its own cleverness, but it knows that God is the source of true wisdom.

Verse 18: And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

“The third chapter of James has proved to be a most concentrated and challenging piece of teaching. Every verse has had its point to make and each one of deep importance for our Christian lives. Yet none surpasses in significance the final verse.”

In verse 18, James singles out for special emphasis one particular attribute of wisdom -- its peaceableness.

This emphasis is very likely the product of James' desire to eradicate the bitter, contentious quarrels and disputes that seem to have been rending the church at this time. The peace produced by true wisdom was notably absent.

The difficulty with the verse is whether it is a statement about what peacemakers produce -- that is, they produce the fruit of righteousness -- or a statement that promises the fruit of righteousness for those who make peace.

Most likely the better sense of the verse is that peacemakers produce the fruit of righteousness as a natural harvest of the peaceful atmosphere they create. It is the opposite of the quarrels and the bitter disputes and the selfish ambition that James saw around him.

Righteousness to James, as we saw in 1:20, means that conduct that is pleasing to God. It includes all the virtues listed in verse 17. It is the opposite of every vile practice we saw in verse 16. This entire verse reminds us of Matthew 5:9 -- blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

“How very important Christian fellowship is! A harmonious fellowship of

believers is the soil out of which grows the whole life that is pleasing to God.”

Chapter 4, Verse 1: From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

In Job 28:12, Job asked “where shall wisdom be found?” We will find that James answer is the same answer that Job found in 28:28, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.” But James will put it in his own way.

In verse 1, as James did back in 3:13, James uses a question to introduce his next topic. And in this case, the topic is one that naturally arises from the preceding discussion.

James has suggested a connection between jealousy and selfish ambition and disorder in 3:16. And now he specifies more clearly what he means by disorder, and he portrays the way it is produced by jealousy and sinful desires. In place of disorder, James now refers to wars and fightings -- extreme cases of disorder.

As with our English words, both of these Greek words were most often used to describe physical conflicts. Both words could, however, also be used to describe verbal disputes. Paul, for example, cautioned Titus to avoid quarrels over the law (3:9). That word translated quarrels there is the same word translated fightings here in 4:1.

It seems most likely that here we are also talking about verbal battles rather than physical battles. And these disputes were apparently accompanied by harsh words and criticism and slander and the general misuse of the tongue that James addressed in Chapter 3.

As one commentator noted, it is deplorable that the Christian church has so often been characterized by such bitter controversies. And although I am sure he was speaking about Christendom at large, sadly his statements could often be applied to the Lord's church.

The Jewish philosopher Spinoza said, "I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion, namely, love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men, should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily to one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues that they profess, is the readiness criteria of their faith." And that is a very sad statement indeed.

Some battles are not only worth fighting but must be fought if we are to be

pleasing to God, but even then they must be fought without sacrificing in any way our Christian principles and Christian virtues. Because if we sacrifice those to win a battle, we have lost the war.

“James chooses the vocabulary of war to express controversies and quarrels in the church, not because there is no other way of saying it, but because there is no other way of expressing the horror of it.”

Now we don't know the specifics of the disputes that motivated James' comments here. But it is very noteworthy that James seems to have been bothered more by the selfish spirit and bitterness of the quarrels than by the rights and wrongs of the various viewpoints. That tells me that these were battles over matters of opinion, because James does not strike me as the sort who would be timid to weigh in on disputes about matters of the faith.

It is very suggestive, as we mentioned earlier, that James is using a word that denotes political factions. There is much truth to the saying that between a person who agrees with you 95% and a person who agrees with you only 5%, you will tend to have more violent disagreements with the former than the latter – and sadly I think we sometimes see the truth of that statement in the church.

What is the source of these quarrels? James points his finger at the passions that are war in your members. The Greek word for passions is a term that simply means pleasure. We get the word hedonism from it. It denotes sinful, self-indulgent pleasure. And that type of sinful, self-indulgent pleasure waging wars in our members is the source of these quarrels.

The picture James paints here is of someone who stands ready at a moment's notice to declare war against anyone who stands in the way of some personal gratification or desire on which he has set his heart.

Verses 2-3: Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. 3 Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

In the first half of verse 2, this evil desire causing the bitter disputes in the church is made even more explicit. You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and you fight.

This pattern focuses on the way in which envy and jealousy inevitably lead to hostile actions such as quarrels, wars, and murder. In Matthew 15:10, the chief priest's decision to deliver Jesus to Pilate was attributed to envy, the same Greek word we see here. While the persecution suffered by the early church is often attributed to jealousy or zeal, the same words we see here. (Acts 5:17,

13:45, Phil. 3:6)

But is James seriously accusing his readers here of murder? (Note from 3:13 and 4:1 that these comments are addressed to those "among you.") Well, interestingly, some commentators suggest he was.

Some of the early Christians may have been members of the radical, Jewish zealot movement, which advocated the assassination of prominent Romans and their collaborators. (We know from Matthew 10:4 that one of the apostles was a zealot. He and Matthew, the tax collector, must have had quite a bit to talk about!) Perhaps James must remind them that such practices are totally incompatible with their new faith. As an aside, it really shouldn't come as a shock to us that religious feelings in the Middle East could lead to murder!

Thus, while James may have had literal murder in mind, another and perhaps better interpretation is that the term murder denotes an attitude rather than an action. When Jesus explored in depth the sixth commandment in Matthew 5, he spoke of anger and name-calling. Was Jesus exaggerating when he brought it all under the heading of murder? Or was John exaggerating when he said that anyone who failed to love his brother was like Cain (1 John 3:11-12)? Perhaps rather it is we who are not viewing these sins seriously enough!

All of these evil behaviors can be traced back to a desire on our part to have more than we have and envy and covetousness. Is it really the case that envy and jealousy and sinful pleasures lie behind many of the disputes in the church? The participants would deny it, but experience tells us the answer is yes. And along with that experience, the inspired word of God tells us that the answer is yes!

In the second half of verse 2, leading on into verse 3, James answer the question as to why this desire to have is frustrated. Why don't we have what we want? James says it is because of their failure to pray properly. You do not have, because you do not ask. Oh, yes, you ask, James admits, must your asking is done with selfish motives, and it is for that reason you don't receive.

In Matthew 7:7, Jesus promised, ask and it shall be given to you. But of course, Jesus meant there, as James means here, an asking that has as its focus and motive the will of God rather than as asking motivated by self-indulgent pleasures.

One commentator noted, "God bestows not gifts only, but the enjoyment of them, but the enjoyment that contributes to nothing beyond itself, is not what he gives in answer to prayer and petitions to him that have no better end in view are not prayers at all."

Calvin: "God does not permit us undisciplined asking."

Verse 4: Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

James' dependence on the Old Testament is very clearly seen in his opening address in verse 4. Where the KJV has "Ye adulterers and adulteresses," the Greek text has only the feminine noun "adulteresses."

Why the feminine form? It is the Old Testament that provides the answer. As the prophets told us, God had joined himself with Israel by graciously electing them and bringing them into a covenant relationship with himself, and this relationship was frequently portrayed in the Old Testament as a marriage. (Isaiah 54:1-6, Jeremiah 2:2) And when that relationship was jeopardized by Israel's departure to serve other gods, the situation was often labeled adultery.

Jeremiah 3:20, for example, says "as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the Lord." And of course this situation is the major theme in Hosea. The prophet's marriage to an unfaithful harlot is used to mirror the unfaithfulness of Israel to the Lord. Israel has played the harlot (2:5), deserting her first husband, the Lord, in order to pursue other lovers, Baal and other false gods (2:7), yet the Lord promises to show mercy to his people, they will again call him my husband (2:16), for the Lord promises, I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord (2:20). Jesus also made use of this imagery, calling those who rejected him an adulterous generation in Matthew 12:39 and 16:4.

As an aside, we should never forget that an attack against marriage is an attack against the church – and we are seeing very aggressive attacks against marriage. Man did not invent marriage, and man cannot redefine it.

James use of the term "adulteresses" in verse 4 thus characterizes his readers as the unfaithful people of God. Although part of God's chosen people in the church, they, like Israel of old, have turned to serve other gods. They have become unfaithful to their covenant relationship with God. By seeking friendship with the world, they are committing spiritual adultery and making themselves enemies of God.

When a believer lives in a way that is characteristic with the world, he demonstrates that his allegiance is to the world, rather than to God. He is seeking friendship with the world, and to do that is to reject friendship with God. Just as Judah and Israel of old often sought safety in foreign alliances rather

than in God, Christians today may be tempted to seek safety apart from God.

Verse 5: Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?

Some commentators say that Verse 5 explains the seriousness of any flirtation with the world by bringing to mind the jealousy of the Lord, which demands a total unreserved and unwavering allegiance from his chosen people. But that is not the only possible interpretation of this difficult verse.

What does the term "spirit" in verse 5 refer to? Some have it refer to the Holy Spirit, while others have it refer to the spirit of man.

In that later situation, James would be making a point here about the human tendency to be envious and jealous. And there is textual support for this view. The term translated "envy" here is always given a negative connotation in Biblical Greek and is never used in reference to God (unless this verse proves to be an exception), and James has used the word already to denote a sinful, human attitude. Similarly, the word translated "yearn" or "desire" here is never used elsewhere with reference to God.

But other commentators argue, that while unusual, the use of these terms with respect to God's desire for his people would not be impossible. And if that view is correct and if this spirit is the Holy Spirit, then verse 5 is a reminder of God's desire that his people be wholly and unreservedly his, and that that desire on God's part should serve as a reminder and a warning regarding flirtation we might have with the world.

Another difficulty is the question of the Old Testament passage to which James is referring here. The words do not closely reproduce any Old Testament text.

If James is referring to actual an Old Testament passage, then the answer must be that James -- who knew the Old Testament intimately -- must be referring here to the Old Testament with a paraphrase of an amalgam of Old Testament passages that make this very point. (Exodus 20:5, 34:14, Zechariah 8:2, and others.)

But why do I ask whether James is referring to an actual Old Testament passage? Because one way to read verse 5 is to have James say, "Or do you think the Scripture speaks in this meaningless way -- that the spirit he made dwell in us yearns with sinful jealousy?" That rendering solves the issues of what passage James is quoting -- he is not quoting any passage!

Which view is correct? It is a close call, but I think it is unlikely that someone like

James, so steeped in the Old Testament and the Septuagint, would speak of God's jealousy using terms that are exclusively used elsewhere to denote man's sinful jealousy.