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James 3:13-4:10

Introduction:

- A. Before we get into the book of Exodus which we will start next week, I wanted to spend one class sharing with you something that I have been struggling with this week.
- B. As a leader of this church, I believe that one of the most important things that I can do is repent publicly. I believe this is important for a number of reasons.
 - 1. First, repentance is a key part of the Christian life. All true Christians should repent regularly and often as they grow in their understanding of who God is and what he requires. The more we learn from Scripture about what is required of us, the more we see how much we fail. So, as a Christian, I need to repent because it is what Christians do.
 - 2. Second, my job is to lead you into maturity in Christ. Since repentance is part of the Christian life, you need to see what that looks like. So, I need to repent publicly so that you see that this is what Christians do.
 - 3. Third, I need to repent publicly so that you can see what it looks like to live in light of God's grace! You need to see that God gives grace upon grace. He doesn't stop giving grace to those who seek forgiveness.
 - 4. Fourth, I need to repent publicly so that you don't think you need to hide your sin. I don't want you to get the impression that to be a part of this group you can't struggle with sin. You need to see that we all struggle with sin. This is not a group of really good people. We are a group of messed up people.
- C. So, this morning I want to tell you that I have been really convicted recently of having a wisdom that does not come from God. I consider myself a wise person theologically, and I believe I know what the church needs to look like. But, today's passage has exposed in me a heart that is not humble which means that my wisdom is not wisdom from God.
- D. Earlier this week, J.D. Greer, the pastor of the Summit Church in Durham, came to speak at our staff retreat. He spoke on this passage and I was really convicted. So, I decided to study the passage some more to share it with you. I want to look at James 3:13-4:10 so that you too can examine your own hearts.
- E. **Fallen Condition Focus:** We might have true knowledge, but if it is not coupled with humility and peace, then it is not wisdom from God.

Proposition: We must beware of false wisdom by being grounded in gospel humility.

Organizational Sentence: Today's passage compares two kinds of wisdom and then calls us to humility grounded in the gospel.

I. Beware of the wisdom that is earthly. (James 3:13-16)

James 3:13-16 ¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

- A. James begins by asking his readers to come forward if they think they are wise. Since James is writing to a church, it appears that James looking at the church asking who in the church thinks they are the wise people who should be leading. This passage seems to be primarily about those in the church who think they should be calling the shots. So, we all have to stop at this point and think about how we judge ourselves.
1. Do you find yourself often thinking you know better than others in the church?
 2. Do you think you should be calling the shots?
 3. Do you wish that the church was run your way?
- B. This is not inherently bad if you think this way. James is not condemning this. But, he is asking the readers to determine whether or not they think of themselves as wise.
- C. Then James begins to examine those of us who think we are wise. He essentially says that we show that we are wise by good works done in humility. So, this is the test. If you think you are wise, examine your life to see if you are doing good in a humble way.
1. Doing good means simply to obey God's Law. We must love God and love others.
 2. Humility is a tricky thing these days. What is humility?
 - a. Humility does not mean we don't think we are right.
 - b. Humility does not mean that we think everyone is right.
 - c. Humility does not mean that we don't think we are wise.
 - d. Humility is an attitude of gratitude for God's grace that stems from recognizing our own sin and fallenness before God.
 - e. Humility recognizes our spiritual poverty.
 - f. Humility is the knowledge and attitude that we are no better than anyone else because no one is justified by works of the Law.
- D. Having stated how true wisdom manifests itself, James then helps us to see ourselves better by describing false wisdom, that is, the wisdom that is not from God. You can tell that your wisdom is false wisdom if:
1. you have bitter jealousy/envy
 2. you have selfish ambition in your heart
- E. If this is true of you, then to claim to be wise is to lie.
- F. Why James warns us to examine our hearts for envy and selfish ambition is clear if we think about it. When we idolize the opinion of others, when we want others to see us as theologically smart or spiritually mature, we have turned the gospel into a means to power and prestige. This is selfish ambition, and this is something that God has revealed is often true of me.
- G. When our wisdom becomes a means to win power or attention, it is clearly not wisdom from God but wisdom that comes from the devil. You might still have wisdom, but it is not wisdom from God that produces the right fruits. Instead, the wisdom that is unspiritual produces disorder and evil practices.
1. In the Old Testament, true wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord. The Old Testament acknowledges that there is another type of wisdom that competes with true wisdom, but this false wisdom leads to destruction.
 2. The alternative to true wisdom that comes from the fear of the Lord is to fear man. This is really the false wisdom James is talking about. When we are concerned with the approval and praise of man, when we seek to gain power and prestige, even when this involves good spiritual things, we are really fearing man and not God.
- H. **Application:**

1. As a leader in the church, this is especially relevant to me. It must examine my heart all the time to make sure that I am operating not out of a desire for self gain, but out of a desire to humbly submit to what God has put in place.
2. But, even as an average lay person in a church, you too must beware of your claims to wisdom. Do you ever find yourself complaining about the leadership? Do you ever find yourself wishing things were done the way you think they need to be done? Do you despise those who are making the decisions and have the influence? Do you ever wish you had more recognition for what you do? These questions help us see our own hearts. James is not concerned that we disagree about theological issues, but the manner in which we disagree and the heart that determines the way in which we disagree.

II. Seek the wisdom that is from God. (James 3:17-18)

James 3:17-18 ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

- A. But, the true wisdom, the wisdom that comes from God results in the same fruits as the fruits of the Spirit. It is remarkable how similar these lists are.
- B. First, wisdom from above is pure. This word is used to describe moral uprightness and blamelessness. Wisdom from above produces right moral behavior. This word summarizes the other things James lists.
- C. Peace results from true wisdom because no one is fighting to gain the upper hand or trying to prove they are the wisest.
- D. Gentleness and openness results because rather than trying to prove that we are right, wisdom drives us to be sure that the community finds what is true no matter who it comes from. This will be done gently because no one is trying to intimidate or bully anyone.
- E. Mercy results because we have more love for others if we are not driven by selfish ambition.
- F. Impartiality results because we are bent by our desire for power or prestige.
- G. Sincerity results because we are trying to trick anyone or fool people into seeing us in a good light.
- H. In short, true wisdom from above results in love for others that manifests itself in a humble spirit.
- I. Verse 18 is a difficult verse to translate, and different versions take it different ways.
 1. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (ESV)
 2. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (NIV, NASB)
 3. The first translation has a better grammatical argument, but the second fits the context better.
- J. It seems that James is either promising a reward for those who make peace as a result of having wisdom from above, or he is telling us that those with wisdom, which manifests itself in peace, will produce righteousness in the community.
- K. It seems to me that James is saying that fruit (righteousness) is produced by living peacefully as a result of wisdom from above. The community will benefit from the peacemakers who do not seek their own personal gain. The community can grow in righteous behavior when the quarrels and envy of the wisdom from the devil are absent. When we don't have personal ambition invested in our disagreements, then our discussion can be civil, reasonable, merciful, and gentle. But if we feel that we must win

the debate in order to save face or in order to gain power, then we will disagree without regard for the other person's well being.

L. **Application:**

1. When we work together as Christians in church or in a campus group, and when we are trying to make decisions together about what to do, we need to watch ourselves. The heart is tricky. It isn't wrong to fight for the truth and to argue for what we believe the bible says we need to do. But, justifiable argument can lead to cantankerous debate where we find ourselves seeking to win an argument rather than serve one another. Then we are seeking selfish ambition with an ungodly wisdom.
2. Now, we must beware that we do not take this passage the wrong way. This passage is not teaching that wisdom from God will never lead us to argue or be confident that we are right when others say differently. James is calling us to examine our hearts to make sure we know what is driving us. The result will be a humility that allows us to discuss our differences openly, fairly, reasonably, impartially, and lovingly so that no one begins to get defensive because they have something inappropriate invested in the discussion.

III. Humble yourself before the Lord. (James 4:1-10)

James 4:1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

- A. After comparing the two kinds of wisdom, James then unpacks even more how these two types of wisdom play out in the real world, and he rebukes his readers for quarrelling as a result of idolatry.
- B. James suggests that unrighteous desires are driving their desires. They don't get the recognition they want, and so they murder their brothers.
 1. What does James mean? Is he saying that the Christians are actually killing one another?
 2. No, James is implying that our words are deadly. When we use our words to insult, it is like deadly poison (James 3:7-9). If we find ourselves talking badly about other Christians, it can only come from evil desires.
- C. When we covet and want the recognition others have, we seek to steal it from them by force. We attack them with arguments that are not intended to help the community grow in knowledge but to overpower and gain the upper hand in the debate.
- D. James tells us that we do not have the things we are seeking, even good things in ministry, because we do not go to God to get them in prayer. When we want to push our agenda, and when we want to see things happen in ministry, and when these desires stem from selfish ambition, we don't ask God for them.
- E. But, even when we pray that God would give us great things in ministry, and when we ask from the wrong motives, God does not answer.

1. This is a really important point. If we are praying for someone to come to salvation so that we will be seen as more spiritual and so that we might gain more recognition and influence, God will often not answer that prayer. He is more concerned about us having the right heart than about saving lost people!
 2. This should tell us something very important about ministry. Even when we want good things in ministry to happen, it matters how we go about seeing them accomplished, especially concerning our spiritual health as a community.
- F. To ask for good things for personal gain is adultery. It is to find our joy and happiness in recognition rather than in God and his ways. James is using the Old Testament imagery of YHWH and His bride Israel. When Israel sought after other gods, she acted as a harlot and an adulterer.
- G. James condemns this and explains that to love the world, which is concerned with power and prestige, is to be an enemy of God. God is jealous for us in whom he has placed his Holy Spirit. We belong to God. That is a large part of what the Spirit does when he enters into us. He is a sign that we are God's. To love the world and to act as God's enemy is to totally reverse what God has done for us in Christ.
- H. But, James reminds us that God gives more grace. He gives grace even when we have become a friend of the world again. He gives more grace so that even in our perverted ministry desires, God forgives and treats us as his children.
1. Notice that James does not simply tell us to stop acting this way. He doesn't tell us to get our act together right off the bat. He doesn't say that we must choose to stop having envy and selfish ambition.
 2. James begins by exposing our sin and then reminds us of God's grace. Then he tells us to repent.
- I. God also gives us the grace to humble ourselves. We cannot humble ourselves unless God gives us this grace. James is telling us that our selfish desires are wrong and are worldly, which God hates since we belong to Him. But James is assuring us that God gives us grace to return in humility. We must submit ourselves to God and surrender to his agendas rather than our selfish ambition.
- J. James then quotes Proverbs 3:34 to make his point that we need to repent and that God will forgive us. He uses a lot of ritual language from the Old Testament worship system to make his point that we need to repent.
1. When we submit to God and draw near to him (that is repent), He will draw near to us.
 2. When we resist the devil and his wisdom, he will flee from us.
 3. We must cleanse our hands as sinners and purify our hearts.
 4. We must weep and mourn.
 5. Our prideful laughter must be turned into mourning and our joy to gloom.
- K. Then James concludes with the statement that we should all memorize and embrace: Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.
1. Repentance is humility.
 2. Not seeking exaltation but serving others is humility.

Conclusion:

A. Beware of false wisdom:

1. We are easily deceived into thinking that since we have understanding that others don't, we are justified in arguing and convincing others even when that involves slandering others and fighting excessively.
2. We can easily justify immoral behavior and attitude because we believe we are right. We become blind to our selfish ambition and act with mixed motives.

B. Seek wisdom from above:

1. We need to seek to be at peace with our brothers, even when we disagree.
2. We need to seek to be merciful toward those we disagree with.
3. We need to discuss and debate with openness to reason. When we are unwilling to reason through our position, this shows we are acting defensively and out of selfish ambition.
4. We need to go to God in prayer for wisdom.

C. Humble yourself before God through repentance.

1. Examine your quarrels and determine what is driving them.
2. Recognize that selfish ambition makes you a friend of the world.
3. Know that God gives grace to bring us to repentance and exalts those who humble themselves.

D. Warning:

1. James is not saying that anyone who argues with others in the church over what Scripture says or over what we should do in light of Scripture has false wisdom.
2. James is not saying that humble people never fervently argue.
3. James is saying that true wisdom seeks peace and shows mercy that creates an environment of peace.
4. There will always be some who are seriously misinformed. They should be corrected with loving humility.
5. There will always be some who are evil and seek to turn the church and the gospel into a means for power, and they should be combated, but with a concern for God's kingdom and the truth, not for personal prestige or power.
6. Envy, slander, dreams of recognition and power reflect that our heart is in the wrong place.