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James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

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***James***

***13Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14******But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be arrogant and lie about the truth. 15This is not wisdom that comes down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18******And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.***

***4 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2You want something and do not have it, so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. 3You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.***

***7Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.***

The other day I was showing someone pictures of the barn my cousins are building on their farm in Sweden. In just three days my cousins went from having only a foundation, to having all four walls and a start to the roof! The friend I was showing it to was happy to be impressed, and said “Can I say something kind of racist about that?” I said, no. They said, “It’s only a little bit racist.” I said, then I don’t need to hear it. They said, “It’s a compliment.” I said, then find another way to say it or don’t say it. What they ended up saying was something like, they’ve never seen anyone able to build that quickly. As I wondered what the racist version could have possibly been, I was struck by how important it was to them to say the thing in the first place. Why not just let it go? They tried three times to say the thing inappropriately and I gave them three chances to *not* say it. What they must have gone through in their minds to struggle to find a way to say it despite my stated disinterest! I mean, if they had to ask in the first place, they probably knew something was fishy. They forgot to also consider not saying it at all.

This person was neither wise nor knowledgeable. Having just finished complaining about the duplicity of our tongues – to both praise and curse – and how an unbridled tongue leads to a religion that is worthless – James today provides us instruction for how to avoid the unbridled tongue and other unworthy actions. So James says, we should seek wisdom. We should “show by our good lives that our works [this includes our speech] are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

Imagine if we thought enough before we acted or spoke to measure our behavior against this high bar. Is what I am going to do or going to say being done with gentleness born of wisdom? Gentleness is often translated as “humility” or “considerateness.” To understand what gentleness born of wisdom means we need to read further. James says there are two types of wisdom – that from above, and that from below. We should take care that our actions are humble, considerate of others, and we should also be mindful that we are considering our actions based on wisdom from above, not wisdom from below.

**Wisdom from below** is earthly, unspiritual, devilish, and comes from hearts filled with bitter envy and selfish ambition, from arrogance and lies about the truth, all of which leads to disorder and wickedness of every kind.

In contrast, James tells us that **wisdom from above** is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. This is the perfect text to come on the weekend of September 21st, the day established in 1981 by a unanimous United Nations Resolution, to observe The International Day of Peace, or “Peace Day.”1

Every time we sow the seeds of peace, we are making peace a reality both in the moment, and collectively over time. Peace will not come without sowing those seeds. When we base our actions on wisdom that gives rise to humility, wisdom that considers the well being of others, we are showing by our lives that our works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

Sometimes when we only think of peace in a global setting, we forget that we have opportunities to plant peace with our every comment or action. James says that our cravings that are at war within us give rise to conflicts and disputes. Consider my friend’s inability to withhold their “racist” comment without significant internal wrestling. What craving was at war within them? A need to be clever? A need to have the last word?

Consider a young person who overstates their heroics or lies, in an effort to receive praise or to seem brave. When that bully picked on that guy, I intervened and the bully ran off. The craving to be brave at war with the fear of appearing weak. Someone overstating their involvement with a successful project in an effort to be on the winning team. The craving of being a part of something at war with the fear of not knowing the subject matter.

I can’t relate to wanting something so badly that I commit murder. Prison psychologists will have to talk to murderers to answer to that. But I can certainly see where someone who covets power or control or prestige so badly they create conflicts and disputes. I don’t only mean politicians. I used to work in the Chemistry department of a University, typing camera ready manuscripts of faculty research. There were often unspoken but rumored stories of a professor listing their name first on the paper in order to get the prestige of authorship, when really the primary investigator was a Ph.D. candidate. Publishing in academia can be brutal. What would an action based on gentleness born of wisdom look like in that situation? Maybe the investigators would be listed in order of contribution and the whole lab would get accolades for the project? The University would get more students for that area of study?

What about a parent who wants control so badly they punish a child for misbehaving, lying by saying they saw the child do the thing? The power differential between the two becomes a common way for a parent to maintain authority and control.

Or even something as simple as coveting something you can’t afford. You purchase it anyway, because the craving of the thing is at war with the fear of the debt that will come.

To hear James talk, we might assume that he is talking about powers and principalities, kings, leaders, powerful people, making wrong decisions leading to a society that is hurting and lost. But James is also talking to us, understanding the struggle that is a human thing, to base our actions on our highest ideals. If we were perfect, we would all be physically healthy, have brilliant minds, we would never hurt others, we would be joyously living our best lives with full bellies, and warm hearts, our primary focus always on helping others. If we were perfect, the kingdom of God would be here on earth today.

We are part of a society that does not like to be told what to do. We are self-motivated, autonomous people, empowered, smart, able to think our way around our lives. This letter of James reminds us that while that may be true, we are susceptible to human foibles and our own dark sides enough that we need to remember where our primary source of strength and love and wisdom comes from. For Christians, our primary source is God. James reminds us that we need to ask correctly for what we want, and we need to submit ourselves to God. A society that does not like to be told what to do, certainly bristles more than a bit at the word “submit!”

The kind of submission that James is talking about though is a not coerced, not subjugation, but rather a confidence we place in what our faith tells us about God. It is a statement of faith to submit to God, to voluntarily surrender to the life to which God is calling us. Praying, drawing near to God, submitting to God are all complicated subjects because they involve understanding God. We each understand God in our own unique way, and therefore see God working in our lives in unique ways. Ours is a spirit filled faith and therefore harder to pin down. We can’t say here is how you listen to God. This is what God sounds like. What does it mean to draw near to God? That could be maybe imagining God sitting in that chair next to you, and you scoot your chair closer. I’ve often had a spiritual director ask if I’ve ever invited God to sit with me. No, of course not, that’s just silly – as I shifted in my seat to make room – in case, um, anyone wanted to sit down next to me. Drawing near to God is as close as our own imagination. God will help us know what to do next.

Let us pray,

1<https://internationaldayofpeace.org/>

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2024-09-16/james-313-43-7-8a-4/>

Doug Bratt

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2021-09-13/james-313-43-7-8a-3/>

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<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2018-09-17/james-313-43-7-8a/>

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<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-2/commentary-on-james-313-43-7-8a-2>

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